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Women in Senior Leadership Roles Career Mobility, Challenges, Success Stories and Need for Future Research

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Women in Senior Leadership Roles

Career Mobility, Challenges, Success Stories and Need for Future Research

A Dissertation Presented

to

The Faculty of the School of Education

Department of Leadership Studies

Organization and Leadership Program

By

Giselle F. Martin, MPA/HSA

San Francisco, CA

May 12, 2022

“tu puedes mujer, camina con tu frente alta y ser chingona!”

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Dissertation Abstract

Women in Senior Leadership Roles

Career Mobility, Challenges, Success Stories and Need for Future Research

Women represent 57.4% of the US working population (~77M in 2019). From this, 51.8% held positions in managerial or professional roles. Although women represent over half of the working population and have demonstrated success in management and professional roles, they face challenges in attaining senior level leadership roles across multiple fields. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to look at how women respond to these challenges as they navigate their careers and ultimately the tools they used to successfully advance to senior level leadership roles.

A qualitative approach was selected as my research method. It involved a personal narrative approach where the soliciting of participant stories were implemented via a formal semi-structured interview as the primary method of inquiry. This research approach allowed me to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the data gathered and understand via a first-person account how participants responded to barriers as they navigated through their careers. Barriers associated with structural and societal gender stereotypes ingrained in our culture and connected to patriarchal views that regardless of a woman's experience, education or abilities, fosters the perception that women are less qualified and less competent than men. This perception deeming women less capable to master senior leadership roles across multiple fields.

In addressing these barriers study participants highlight the tools they used to successfully advance to senior level leadership roles. Key tools that enabled them to take ownership of their careers, attained senior leadership roles and execute them successfully. These are resilient, transformational women that exercise their soft skills and lead with authenticity. Strong confident women that take risks and move barriers in spite of hearing “No” along the way. Women that in their leadership approach value the insights of others while empowering them to meet their full potential. These are inspirational leaders that understand the importance of elevating their voice and the voices of those that surround them. Most significantly, these are women who were once little girls that learned from their family and community they could accomplish anything they set their minds to.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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May 12, 2022
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Dedication

With deep love this work is dedicated to my wonderful children; Oscar Martin Jr. and Brianna Gabrielle Martin. My children have been my inspiration and the reason I always strive to be my best self and reach my full potential! My beautiful son, Oscar Jr., who is enjoying eternal peace and from the heavens guides and looks after me. My beautiful daughter Brianna, a smart dedicated law student that like her mama reaches for the stars. They have both made me very proud and I'm very fortunate to be their mother! As such, I too want to ensure they are proud of me. My children, because of you I thrive!
Su madre los ama siempre!

I would like to further dedicate this work to my parents; my father Rafael Flores Villafaña, who joins my son in heaven, and mother Elva Flores Osorio, the strongest woman I know! Through them I learned the importance of cultivating a strong work ethic and exercising perseverance. This realization forming in me a passion for life and all its possibilities! I'd like to further dedicate this work to my siblings. My three sisters and partners in crime, Perlita, Canda and Meli, who I can always count on. My brother Edgar who I don't get to see often, but is always in my heart.

To my extended family and friends I'd voice that our dreams and aspirations are possible. All it takes is following the magic formula of strong work ethics and perseverance. Leaning on each other for support and being our best cheerleaders as we take the steps towards what can be. To all of you that extended me words of encouragement and care, I thank you!

My family, I dedicate my passion of learning and academic growth to you!

Acknowledgements

With sincere gratitude I would like to acknowledge and thank all the strong women in my life for their support and inspiration! There have been many women and men alike, who have helped me along my academic journey. To all of you, I am eternally grateful as my dissertation would not have been possible without you! A very special thank you must go out to my dissertation committee members: Chairperson, Desiree Zerquera, PhD, Ursula Aldana, PhD and Jane Bleasdale, PhD. This group of strong intelligent women stood by me every step of the way. They pushed me in more ways than one, always ensuring my product was at its best. I have learned quite a bit from you and my promise to you is that this gained knowledge will not go in vain! I would like to further thank my inaugural doctoral advisor Danfeng Soto-Vigil Koon, PhD, JD, for steering me in the right path. To all of my USF professors, thank you for your dedication, the lectures, the knowledge and the strength you shared with me. Because of you and the overall USF community, I am a well-educated Latina prepared to scale brick walls! To Thanh Ngo Ly, the SoE Program Assistant, thank you working vigorously behind the scenes and keeping me on top of all the important deadlines. There is one additional group of special women I would like to thank, my study participants. I thank you for sharing your stories with me. I was immensely inspired by your struggles, perseverance and your successes. I am humbled by your dedication towards elevating others and aspire to be as righteous as you. Each of your stories while unique, connected in in a very important way. We are women and together we will continue to prevail! I am honored to put your stories forward!

Pa delante mujer, nunca pa tras!

Poem: Still I Rise

As a token of my appreciation to all that have contributed in my life and academic journey, I share with you the poem, *Still I Rise*. Written by Maya Angelov in 1976, it's a poem about self-respect and confidence. I find her words to be inspirational and hope you will too. Enjoy!

Still I Rise

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.*

*Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.*

*Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.*

*Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?*

*Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.*

*You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.*

*Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?*

*Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.*

*Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.*

~Maya Angelov~

And shall we all rise together!

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CHAPTER I

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

General Idea Statement

I have always been drawn to leadership. It's a passion I have rooted deep in me. It runs through my veins filling my lungs like the air I breathe, energizing me like the sun I take in. This passion keeping me exhilarated and motivated. Taking me to the next career advancement opportunity at hand. As the oldest daughter to Mexican immigrants, raised in the projects of L.A., growing up in a poor family of seven, I needed to work to support my material needs. Therefore, I entered the workforce at the age of 13, and have been working ever since.

My desire for more out of life kindled my career aspirations and led to a focus on women in leadership roles. The stories behind their career mobility; the challenges and successes in the attainment of these roles fascinate me. As I studied more about women in leadership, I incorporated these learnings into my own career advancement. I had entry-level positions that turned into supervisory roles, then mid-level management roles, and the role I hold today as Director of Finance and Operations for a large academic department at a prestigious university located in Northern California.

Reaching this level of leadership role was not easy. I started my professional work endeavor with very little leadership experience and a lack of post-secondary education. Although this passion for leadership was rooted within me, it did not prepare me for career advancement. As a woman of color, early in my career I hit advancement roadblocks and experienced the challenges many women, and particularly women of

color face as they aim to move up the corporate ladder. Therefore, I knew I needed to work twice as hard to achieve career advancement. I realized that attaining a college degree, in addition to gaining professional experience and benefiting from mentoring sessions from women already in leadership roles was going to contribute to my ability to advance in my career. For years I attended school in the evenings and weekends while working full-time and raising a young family. As I navigated through my post-secondary education and completed my undergraduate studies, my passion for leadership had grown deeper. This passion was not only evident to me, but also to those in my professional environment. Mentors encouraged me to pursue graduate education to expand my leadership capabilities and reach my full potential!

Mentors played a significant role in my professional advancement. The advice I received from experienced professionals helped shape my career and navigate the challenges associated with advancement. It also influenced my leadership attributes, this allowing me to lead with authenticity. Consequently, to further fuel my passion for leadership, I took the advice I received from my professional circle. I expanded my academic aspirations and pursued a Master of Public Administration Degree (MPA). With enthusiasm I thought to myself, once I get that graduate degree, I will have the credibility I need to continue advancing in my career!

After years of hard work and sleepless nights, the day had finally arrived; I was hanging my long-awaited graduate degree in my small corner office! Yet, what should have been a joyful event turned bitter when my boss at that time, the chair of the department, a male physician, simply grunted as my eyes gleamed with excitement. His lack of support soon became no surprise to me as I witnessed how he lacked value for

highly educated women in the department. He was sexist, prejudice and manipulative; this pushing intelligent women out of the department. A type of experience that many women still encounter today. I was no exception, he threatened me indicating that HR wanted to fire me. A controlling tactic he believed would keep me quiet, humbled, and complacent! Ahmed (2017) indicates that “sometimes we have to struggle to snap bonds, including familial bonds, those that are damaging or at least compromising of a possibility that you are not ready to give up” (p. 188). While his words had no validity as my work ethics and professionalism were intact, they were damaging to my professional growth. I knew it was time to break bonds and move on!

Carefully crafting my plan, I started to make important professional connections. Simultaneously, the university I worked for at that time recognized me broadly as a great manager. This came as a result of a staff engagement survey where I was highly ranked by my staff as empowering and supportive; a leadership skill extremely effective women managers are known to poses. A university article written by a well-known critical feminist of the area was published and distributed broadly to recognize my effort. This act in itself reestablished my credibility as I carefully continued to move forward and advance in my career.

Viewing my own leadership story as a success in spite of adversity, with more success planned to come, allows me to understand the challenges women face as they aim to advance in their careers and break through the glass ceiling. Challenges that must be addressed and learned from in order to continue opening the doors of advancement for women and empowering their career aspirations. As such, the purpose of this study is to look at how women respond to these challenges as they navigate through their careers

and ultimately the tools they used in order to successfully advance to senior level leadership roles. Important work I have taken on via this study to help the cause and as a direct reflection of the passion I have for leadership!

Statement of the Problem

Women represent a significant number of the working population, with 57.1% (approximately 66 million women), captured in 2018 by the [US Department of Labor](#). From this working population, 40% of women held positions in managerial or professional roles ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)). Although women represent over half of the working population and have demonstrated success in management and professional positions, they continue to face barriers in attaining senior level leadership roles across multiple fields ([Fortune](#), 2019; [Pew Research Center](#), 2018; Seo, et al, 2017; Schwanke, 2013; Johns, 2013). In this study I provide a background of women in the U.S. workforce and highlight the challenges women face in accessing and attaining senior level leadership roles. Many of these challenges resulting from gender stereotypes structurally ingrained in our society and corporate settings. Stereotypes that set gender expectations on what men and women should be like. As a result of these societal expectations, creating barriers that curtail women's access to career mobility and attainment of senior leadership roles (Oakley, 2000; McEldowney, et al., 2009; Schein, 2001; Fels, 2004; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Powell, 2011; Ryan, et al., 2011; Ibarra, et al., 2013; Johns, 2013; Schwanke, 2013; O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Northouse, 2016; Lublin, 2016; Kubu, 2017; Seo, et al., 2017; Carnevale, et al., 2018; Offerman & Foley, 2020). This is despite the benefits a diverse workforce that include women in top management teams bring to organizations. Benefits that include greater financial gains, increased

employee morale, satisfaction, retention and have a more transformational approach to leadership in comparison to men (Catalyst, 2004; Catalyst, 2011; Coates, 2011; Dezso & Ross, 2012; Schwanke, 2013; Mercer, 2014; Adler, 2015; Seo, et al., 2017; Hoobler, et al., 2018; Offerman & Foley, 2020). Most significantly I highlight the fact that there are a number of women in the US workforce who continue to achieve success in their careers and have attained senior leadership roles (Rimm, 1999). This is irrespective to the multiple barrier's women face as they navigate their careers and aim to move up the corporate ladder (Ibarra, et al., 2011, 2013; Lublin, 2016; Abrams, 2019).

Background and Study Need

Women have had to fight for their place in society for centuries. Yet have been instrumental in the ruling of empires, forming of nations, key to politics, medical advances and strengthening of world economies. Many times, taking action under scrutiny and severe oppression. This study focuses on present times. It touches upon the advancements women have made since entering the paid US workforce over 150 years ago. It acknowledges that women have been successful at attaining professional and managerial roles. Yet highlights the challenges many women encounter as they aim to advance in their careers and into senior leadership roles. Barriers resulting from gender stereotypes structurally ingrained in our society that view women as less suitable for leadership in comparison to men and this curtailing women's access and attainment of senior leadership roles. For those women that have attained senior leadership roles, it looks at how they responded to these challenges as they navigated their careers and moved up the corporate ladder.

Women joined the paid US workforce as early as 1840, with women over the age of 16 making up 14.8% of the working population by 1865, and 24% by 1920 (Kleinberg,1999). Alongside with them, leaders such as Mary Harris Jones, better known as “Mother Jones” guiding the way. A ferocious radical labor organizer and activist leader of that era, she worked diligently in motivating working women (and men iron workers) to keep going and fighting for equality in the workforce. During this time the struggles for equality was a noticeable problem for women in the work force. Women were faced with working long hours with a poor pay, while needing to balance an active family life. Yet, it was the very women that struggled with inequality that became the activist to support the cause (<https://www.motherjones.com/>).

Today women represent a significant number of the working population. Per 2018 data from the [US Department of Labor](#), 57.1% of women participated in the workforce representing approximately 66 million women. From these, the [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) further suggests that 40% of women held positions in managerial or professional roles. With areas such as human resource management, medical health services, public relations and social and community services management ranging at 70%. Though, according to Seo, et al., (2017) women represent only 14.6% of executive officers in Fortune 500 companies. What is more, [Fortune](#) suggests that as of June 2019, 33 women were CEOs in Fortune 500 companies, representing a 6.6% of overall CEO’s. This signifies a moderate increase in female CEOs from the 24 in 2018, and significant increase compared to 1996 where only 2 women held CEO roles. While a significant increase, still at a very slow rate. Additional data from the [Pew Research Center](#) suggests similar trends for women in different types of leadership roles. Fortune 500 board

members represent 22.2%, US Senators 25%, Senior US House 23.4%, State Legislative 28.6%, Governors 18%, and Cabinet-level positions 26.1%. This same data source indicates that as of 2016, 30.1% US college presidents were women; nearly a triple increase from 1986 where the number was at 9.5%.

Women have also made significant progress in education. Per the [Pew Research Center](#) women first received more than half of the bachelor's degrees in 1981-1982, and by 2007 had surpassed men. Today women represent 50.2% of the educated labor force, and 57% of college students seeking undergraduate degrees. The Pew Research Center further confirms that by the first quarter of 2019, 29.5 million women in the work force had a bachelor's degree. Additionally, the [National Center for Educational Statistics](#) verifies that women attaining master's degrees are at 58.4% and doctorate degrees at 52.7%. This represents approximately 3 million more women currently enrolled in postsecondary education in comparison to men (Carnevale, et al., 2018). Research further suggests education has played an important role in the advancement of women. From the 1,000 successful women interviewed for her study, Rimm (1999) highlights that a third had a master's degree, and another third had a doctorate in the arts and sciences or professional degree in medicine or law; these advanced degrees significantly contributing to their career advancement. A study conducted by Salas-Lopez, et al., (2011), looks at factors related to leadership success. From the eight women that participated in the study, all were highly educated with advanced degrees and indicated that education was an important factor to their journey and development as a leader.

Despite the fact that women are making significant educational gains and using education as their primary strategy for economic progress, there is still work to be done

for equitable pay as women earn .81 cents on the dollar compared to men (Carnevale, et al., 2018). Pay inequalities resulting from “historically rooted gender bias” that are still in existence today. Connected to structural oppression that manifests in society via the gender wage gap that shows men consistently earn more for the same work than women ([Pew Research Center](#), 2013; Johns, 2013; Cole, 2019; Crossman, 2021). Evidence further suggests that while education has played an important role in the advancement of women in the workforce and in the attainment of management roles, the slow promotion of women to senior level leadership roles is disheartening as women remain significantly underrepresented in positions of power (Bass, et al., 1994; Oakley, 2000; McEldowney, et al., 2009; Johns, 2013; Schwanke, 2013; Seo, et al., 2017). The “glass ceiling” a metaphor used to symbolize a barrier to the advancement in a profession, primarily affecting women, exists today (Powell, 2011). This barrier is in spite the fact that skilled women are suited for senior leadership roles, sometimes more than their male counterparts (McEldowney, et al., 2009; Johns, 2013; Seo, et al., 2017; Carnevale, et al., 2018). Contributing factors associated with the glass ceiling phenomenon are gender stereotypes ingrained in us early on (Schein, 2001; Fels, 2004; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Powell, 2011; Ryan, et al., 2011; Ely & Kolb, 2013; Johns, 2013; Schwanke, 2013; [Pew Research Center](#), 2013; O’Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Northouse, 2016; Lublin, 2016; Kubu, 2017; Seo, et al., 2017; Carnevale, et al., 2018; Offerman & Foley, 2020) and structurally present in society and corporate settings. Gender features understood to be a structural identity that is deeply entwined with social hierarchies and leadership status. With the dominance of men in top leadership roles often tied to cultural stereotypes towards gender (O’Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Soe, et al., 2017). Structural issues deeply rooted in our

culture that view women as the main caretaker for their homes. This not permitting them to fully exercise their career aspirations due to what is viewed as their “primary obligations”. Structures that include male dominated “old boys’ networks” or “second generation gender bias” which contribute to the ambiguity relating to women’s advancement (Schwanke, 2013; O’Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Kubu, 2017; Seo, et al., 2017). Traditional gender stereotypes about leaders that view men’s masculine or agentic qualities as ideal for leadership. In contrast, communal qualities that are primarily viewed to be feminine as not fit for leadership yet sought during times of poor company performance (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Seo, et al., 2017; Offerman & Foley, 2020). This structural oppression placing aspiring female leaders at a distinct disadvantage in their pursuit of senior leadership roles.

Structural and societal gender stereotypes not only place aspiring women at a disadvantage. The lack of gender diversity that includes more women on top leadership roles has a financial impact on our economy as companies that don’t have women at the realm are less profitable than those that do (Catalyst, 2004; Catalyst 2011; Coates, 2011; Dezso & Ross, 2012; Schwanke, 2013; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017; Hoobler, et al., 2018). Findings from a 2004 Catalyst study confirms this research and indicates that companies with the highest representation of women on their top management teams experience better financial performance than companies with lower women representation. Similarly, in 2011 Catalyst looked at the financial performance of Fortune 500 companies over a five-year period. Findings from this study indicate that those companies with sustained high representation of women on their boards “significantly outperformed” those who sustained low representation of women on their boards. There

are factors related to how women lead that contribute to an organization's success and with that, its financial gains (Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Ayman and Korabik, 2015; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017). Abilities and soft skills that are flexible, inclusive, trustworthy, humanistic and diplomatic in nature. A transformational and authentic leadership approach that allows for relationship building and earns the trust of others. Attributes that successful women leaders possess and that benefit an organization bottom line. In spite the multiple benefits women leaders bring to organizations, and over 150 years of women's participation in the US labor force, structural and societal gender stereotypes while diluted, continue to exist today. This creating barriers for aspiring women wanting to access and attain senior leadership roles.

In conducting the research for this study there was extensive literature on the challenge's women face in accessing and attaining senior leadership roles. Challenges specifically surrounding gender stereotypes structurally present in society and corporate settings (Oakley, 2000; Schein, 2001; McEldowney, et al., 2009; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Powell, 2011; Haslam et al., 2011; [Pew Research Center](#), 2013; Johns, 2013; Schwanke, 2013; Northouse 2016; O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Seo, et al., 2017). In addition, there is literature on the organizational benefits of having women at the realm, that include financial gains, employee satisfaction and talent that adds to organizational competitive advantages (Catalyst, 2004; Catalyst 2011; Coates, 2011; Dezso & Ross, 2012; Schwanke, 2013; Mercer, 2014; Adler, 2015; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017; Hoobler, et al., 2018; Offerman & Foley, 2020). However, while there is some, it was difficult to find extensive literature on successful women in senior leadership roles. This leads me to believe the research in this area currently falls short and there is need for further research

that highlights the successes of such women in the attainment of these roles. Research that can potentially provide a platform for others wanting to follow this path. There is significant need for this study as it will allow us to further understand the barriers women face in accessing and attaining senior leadership roles, despite the benefits women leaders bring to organizations. However, it is just as vital to highlight the career trajectories of those women that have attained these roles. This essential recognition of understanding the barriers, along with the successes of women in their attainment of senior leadership roles will help create a pathway that will empower the next generation of women leaders. Our daughters, granddaughters and future generations of women leaders to come. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to look at both the barriers' women encounter as they navigate their careers and the successes of such women in the attainment of senior leadership roles.

Theoretical Conceptual Rationale Framework

This study aims to understand the lived experiences of women in the workforce. It, specifically focuses on the challenges women face when seeking senior leadership roles. For those that have obtained these roles, the factors that influence women's career success. To understand this phenomenon, I use *Social Feminist Theory* and *Transformational Leadership Theory*, as the theoretical framework of this research. To understand the lived experiences of women in the workforce *Social Feminist Theory* will allow me to identify the challenges women face in attaining senior leadership roles via the sole purpose of being females. *Transformational Leadership Theory* will help me understand leadership traits associated to women's success in leadership roles, as transformational traits are found to be more congruent with women vs men. It will further

help me understand if the execution of such traits support women's advancement in their careers. However, I maintain the view of leadership theories while grasping that many were developed with male managers in mind, as Powell (2011) indicates.

Social Feminist Theory

Social Feminist Theory offers lenses from which to understand the nature of gender inequity and examines women's and men's societal roles and approach in different environments. Feminist Theory unofficially emerged in the early part of the 1800s, with publications such as *The Changing Women*. This is a Navajo folktale that speaks about Asdzáá nádleehé, a Goddess that Native Americans believe populated the world. Therefore, she is viewed as a highly respected woman by this population. As such giving strong leading women credit alike. The theory arose officially in the late 1960s via the social feminist movement with organizations such as the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU) as instrumental in the social feminist vision (cwlulherstory.org). Jackson (1998), indicates that "Feminist social theory has been concerned with understanding fundamental inequalities between women and men and with analyses of male power over women. Its basic premise is that male dominance derives from the social, economic and political arrangements specific to particular societies" (p. 12). Feminism encourages business to include the views of women in its consideration and provide women and all people with equal opportunity for paid employment and interrupt the status quo (Harquail, 2020). Further, the practice and support of feminism is important for the liberation of women, as it pushes for equality by "breaking apart and recreating a man-made world" (Bhattacharya, p. 83). Hence, a

critical lens for me to explore as it will allow me to further appreciate how equality or inequality of the sexes plays a role in promotional growth for women.

Transformational Leadership Theory

As described by Northouse (2016), transformational leadership is part of the “New Leadership” paradigm, which gives more attention to the charismatic and affective elements of leadership...transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms people. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals. It includes assessing followers’ motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as human beings” (p.161). Powell (2011), suggests that “transformational leaders motivate subordinates to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the group or organization by setting exceptionally high standards for performance and then developing subordinates to achieve these standards. In this way they turn followers into leaders” ...He further indicates that the transformational leadership style appears to be more compatible with the feminine than the masculine gender role, and that femininity is particularly needed by manager to be effective in today’s workplace (p. 138-141). Given that women are socialized to adopt these transformational traits it is imperative to understand how the exercising of such can bring success to organizations, and with this further promoting the advancement of women into senior leadership roles.

These theories were selected as my conceptual rationale framework because combined they paint a true picture of what it is like for women in corporate and social settings. Which is, women have unique transformational leadership traits that can contribute to successful leadership and organizational flourishing. Yet, many women face career mobility challenges that include lack of access and attainment of senior leadership

roles. These barriers result from gender stereotypes structurally ingrained in our society and corporate settings. Gender stereotypes that dictate what leaders should be like and view men's agentic qualities as ideal for leadership. In contrast, communal qualities primarily viewed to be feminine as not fit to lead.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to look at how women respond to challenges as they aim to move up the corporate ladder. Most significantly determine the elements that influence women's career success, with career success defined by Dries (2011) and reaffirmed by Jones and Jones (2017), as "the achievement of professional and personal objectives in conjunction with work-life satisfactions", with each of my study subjects expanding on their own definition of success. By documenting the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles that address challenges and highlight successes, my hope is to explore how their narratives could inform best practices to strengthen the pipeline and pave a smoother pathway for future female leaders in the workforce.

Research Questions

Via a qualitative study where the findings and recommendations are based on data obtained from a small group of women (8-10) in senior leadership roles. Using their narratives, I aim to understand the participant's perception of women's underrepresentation in senior leadership roles. Their personal experiences on the way to achieving their leadership role and if their work-life experience contributed this attainment. In understanding this I aim to answer the following questions: *1) What were*

the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?, 2) *What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?*, and 3) *What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?*. Guided by the Social Feminist Theory lens, I explore the possible challenges and barriers the study participants may have faced when seeking senior leadership roles and if women's societal roles in this environment contributed to these barriers. Similarly, guided by the Transformational Leadership Theory lens, I aim to explore how the study participants used key traits of transformational leadership which is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals, to obtain senior leadership roles, and excel in them. I have selected these three questions as I believe that while it is important to understand the current challenges women face in the attainment of senior leadership roles and will incorporate in my research as those challenges should not be undermined, it is just as important to highlight the career trajectories of those women that have attained these positions. It is my hope that this study will have significant impact on the career progression of women, for it is my strong belief that if we focus on positive outcomes, while being sensitive and active towards the work that still needs to take place, we will create a pathway that will empower the next generation of women leaders. This positive thought process has been ingrained in me for some time. As a young adult, constantly listening to Brian Tracy's 1984 The Psychology of Achievement CD program, allowed me to understand the power of attitude as important factors in achieving success. In these CD's Tracy (1984) suggests that "Our attitudes come from our expectations about outcomes. If we expect things to turn out well, we have positive

attitudes. If we expect things to turn out poorly, we have negative attitudes.” It is because of his teachings that I followed closely for years that I believe stressing positive outcomes will help create a pathway that will empower the next generation of women leaders.

This mindset helped me stay focused as I navigated the different phases of my career. It empowered me to move up the corporate ladder in spite of structural barriers that surfaced along the way. Barriers that continued to be present for me even after career progression. In addressing my own research questions, the barriers I have overcome surrounded equitable pay, and improper classification of leadership roles I’ve performed. In one occasion, where I managed a medium size academic and medical services department, I earned 25% less in pay in comparison to the senior associates I supervised. Due to the oppressive work setting I did not dare ask for an adjustment in pay. Instead, utilizing my networking skills and professional background, I empowered myself and selected to expand my horizons. I sought a promotional opportunity elsewhere that resulted in an immediate 40% pay increase. However, I was to experience equity barriers past this amazing opportunity. On a separate occasion, during an organizational job review process, the leadership role I held was reclassified to a lower classification. This classification did not match the jobs significant responsibilities or pay grade. It was inequitable compared to other roles with similar duties, yet that were classified properly. Behind this local decision was a senior leader that believed I had to grow into the role vs classifying it accordingly; an explanation given to me by human resources. This was in spite the fact I was not only performing but excelling in the role’s extensive responsibilities. I asked myself, and posed the question to others, ‘had it not been a woman in the role, would it have been classified accordingly without me having to prove

a case?’ Not allowing this local decision to get in my way and by exercising a transformational leadership approach, I strategically pushed the efforts towards a path of equity and proper classification of the role. This strategy required I conduct considerable amount of research and gather statistical data on similar roles that I would present in making a case. While this process was extensive, the classification correction led to a 15% pay increase. Most significantly, it set the tone that one person in a position of power and by exercising their own bias, can’t dictate what should be an equitable job classification. Furthermore, that as an individual woman, I could contribute to impactful change that in the long-term would benefit others.

Reflecting back on Brian Tracy’s 1984 *The Psychology of Achievement* CD program, I am cognizant that having a positive mindset alone does not simplify career progression for women. Nor does it eliminate the structural gender biases ingrained in our society and corporate settings that interfere in women’s career progression. In my situation, this mindset has been a strength that influences my thought process, and as a result has helped me tackle the many barriers that have presented as I have navigated my career.

Educational Significance and Benefit of the Study

While extensive research highlights the challenges women face in reaching senior level leadership roles (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Oakley, 2000; Schein 2001; McEldowney, Bobrowski & Gramberg, 2009; Powell, 2011; Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno, 2011; Northouse 2016; Seo, et al., 2017; Carnevale, Smith &, Gulish 2018; Offerman & Foley, 2020), I would like to re-emphasize my position for the need to conduct additional research that highlights success stories of women that have surpassed the glass ceiling

and are currently thriving in their leadership roles. By showcasing these stories, it is my hope that this study is a resource for other women that aspire career mobility as this added research will demonstrate that while challenging, career success can be attained! As such, I am convinced that this study will contribute to existing research and will be an added resource to the career progression of women. It is my belief that if we focus on positive outcomes, while being sensitive and active towards the work that still needs to take place, we will create a pathway that will empower the next generation of women leaders. Our daughters, granddaughters and future generations to come.

“We have to be the women we want our daughters to be.”

~Brené Brown~

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined for this study.

- *Glass Ceiling*: A metaphor used to acknowledge barriers to advancement in a profession that appears to restrict women's access to top management positions solely because they are women (Powell, 2011).
- *Glass Cliff*: A term used when women are appointed to leadership position associated with greater risk and criticism (Northouse, 2016).
- *Leadership*: Is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2016).
- *Success*: The achievement of professional and personal objectives in conjunction with work-life satisfactions (Dries, 2011; Jones & Jones, 2017).
- *Transformational Leaders*: motivate subordinates to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the group or organization (Powell, 2011).
- *Authentic Leaders*: represents one of the newest areas of leadership research and focuses on whether leadership is genuine and real (Northouse, 2016).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

Drawing from over 65 pieces of scholarly work that span across a 100-year period, in this literature review I focus on the barrier's many women encounter as they navigate their careers and aim to move up the corporate ladder. Barriers resulting from gender stereotypes ingrained in our society and present in corporate settings. This creating a deeply rooted structural oppression that curtails women's access and attainment of senior leadership roles. I set the stage by providing an introduction that reflects on the progress women have made since entering the paid US workforce in 1840 and in attaining middle management roles. Yet I touch upon the fact that progress has been significantly slow as it pertains to the realization of senior leadership roles. For those women that have attained these roles I highlight key success factors that contributed to this achievement. My literature review findings are organized by four themes that reflect on the *1) organizational benefits of having women at the realm, 2) structural and societal barriers gender stereotypes play for women in the access and attainment of senior leadership roles, 3) other hidden challenges women face including a perceived lack of strategic vision and family responsibilities and 4) key factors that support the attainment of senior leadership roles for women.* Each topic presented builds on the next and is accompanied by supporting literature that helps inform the study and answer the research questions posed.

Introduction

Depictions of leadership traits date back to the early 1800's, with leadership theories historically based on male domination in society and from this the "Great Man Theory" as the first leadership theory to emerge (McEldowney, Bobrowski and Gramberg, 2009). In this approach it was thought that the personal attributes of a "great man" determined the course of history, where "heroes" were born, not made (Northouse, 2019). However, the criticism of this theory is that it is typically associated with masculinity (Gorkes, 2021). The "Great Man Theory" led to the 1940's study of the "Trait Characteristic Theory". Leadership traits associated with this theory were deemed critical for success. Nevertheless, this theory was also studied from a male perspective as at that time only 4% of management roles were occupied by women. This was jeopardizing for the advancement of women into leadership roles as male-dominated agentic features such as assertion and control fit the model for leadership. On the contrary, women communal features such as nurturing and relationship-building were not seen as traits that contributed to one's leadership ability (McEldowney, et al., 2009; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009).

Women faced the negative effects of these masculine theories in the early part of the 20th century as they were not allowed to conduct the jobs that were deemed for men. This became prevalent at the beginning of World War I, when women in the United States experienced the opening of new jobs as men left their work to join the military. Even though women were an important part of the workforce and familiarized with the factory setting, they were not allowed to perform many of the male dominated roles. It was not until 1939 during World War II that things started to change for working women.

As men left the workforce to become soldiers, women were forced to take their place. There were massive propaganda efforts in order to encourage women to work, with “Rosie the Riveter” posed as a strong women leader. Due to the shortage in labor supply women now had the opportunity to work both service and professional jobs that were previously only deemed for men. This was great progress for women already in, or newly entering the workforce as it would help open the doors to the attainment of managerial roles.

Structural and societal gender stereotypes become more prevalent in the 1960’s and early 1970’s as issues of inequality in the workforce rose more into light when women entered the corporate workforce as entry level managers. Career struggles for women were very real at that time. In a 1994 article, authors Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio, highlight this struggle using as example the hiring tactics of NASA. In 1962, NASA tested 25 female pilots along with male applicants for the astronaut program. These women had passed the tests in with high scores, and some had entered the program with twice as many flying miles as compared to their male counterparts. In addition, NASA’s first Mercury Program found that given the circumstances women would have made better pilots than their male counterparts, yet NASA still opted to keep women out of these programs and their main stand was “No Women!”

In spite of these existing inequalities, progress for working women continued to slowly prevail. The women’s liberation movement (WLM), Equal Pay Act of 1963, and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which banned sexual discrimination, helped pave the path for women in the workforce (Powell, 2011; Lublin, 2016). Documented as a significant event for women liberation was the introduction of “the pill”. The female

oral contraceptives that allowed women to plan for an education or work outside of the household without the uncertainties of an unplanned pregnancy (Powell, 2011; Lublin, 2016). Having the freedom to plan allowed women to hold off on marriage and enter universities at a larger number. This as a result, facilitated women's preparation for managerial and professional careers (Powell, 2011). As such, we experienced a wave in female college graduates and an expanded presence of women in professional and business roles (Powell, 2011; Lublin, 2016). In the US, from 1950 to 2000, the portion of college degrees earned by women went from 24% to 57% at bachelor's level, and from 29% to 58% at master's level. During this timeframe business degrees earned by women went from 7% to 50% at the bachelor's level, and 4% to 40% at the master's level (Powell, 2011). The advancements made since the 1960's, specifically with the introduction of the pill, have allowed women to plan for an education. This is significant as research suggests that pursuing advance education has been a contributing factor in the career advancement of women and the attainment of senior leadership roles (Rimm, 1999; Salas-Lopez, 2011; Ibarra, et al., 2013; Abrams, 2019).

In the late 1990's we start to see women aggressively advancing into managerial positions (Oakley, 2000). From 1993 to 1996, women increased their share of all middle management positions in the U.S. In this three-year time span women went from holding 32% of the overall middle management roles, to holding 43% (Oakley, 2000). Nonetheless, the dilemma to reach senior leadership roles continued to persist for women. Only 5% of women in management held the highest paid management positions, and in 1997 only 2 women were CEO's in Fortune 500. While the number of women in middle management roles grew quite rapidly, the number of female CEO's in large corporations

remained stagnant. At that time Oakley (2000), examined the question as to why women were not able to rise to high level leadership roles and the possible explanations behind it. She indicates that this included the possibilities for lack of line experience, poor career mobility opportunities, gender-based stereotypes, tokenism and “the old boy network at the top” (p. 321). Similarly, McEldowney, et. al., (2009), advice that the number of women in leadership roles in American politics hovered around 22% from 1999 to 2006, and increased only by 2.2% in 2009. In the same year, the proportion of women in corporate boards was at 16%, with no evidence of future growth. Authors state “It is evident that women are underrepresented in top leadership positions and must intensely challenge the status quo” (p. 24). They further indicate that while literature suggests that women are better educated, have more experience (at times more so than men), and are suited for leadership positions, their promotion to senior level leadership roles is discouraging.

As a recap of the 2018 data presented in my background and study need, per the [US Department of Labor](#) today women represent 57.1% of the workforce and from this working population the [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) suggests that 40% of women held positions in managerial or professional roles. However, these numbers are not representative of women in senior level leadership roles. According to Seo, et al., (2017) women represent only 14.6% of executive officers in Fortune 500 companies, and per [Fortune](#), as of June 2019, women represent only 6.6% of overall CEOs in Fortune 500 companies. Additional data from the [Pew Research Center](#) suggests women represent 22.2% of Fortune 500 board members, 25% US Senators, 23.4% Senior US House, 28.6% State Legislative, 18% Governors and 26.1% Cabinet-level positions.

Concluding Introduction

Almost two decades after Oakley's 2000 findings, the dilemma to reach senior leadership roles continues to persist for women. Passionate about this topic, Deborah L. Rhode's, the Ernest W. McFarland Professor of Law, Director of the Center on the Legal Profession, and Director of the Program in Law and Social Entrepreneurship at Stanford University, is contributing to leading change. Author of over 250 articles and over 20 books, including *Women and Leadership*, she focuses on women's underrepresentation in leadership roles and questions why it continues and what we can do about it. She indicates that:

For most of recorded history, men have held nearly all of the most powerful leadership positions. Today, although women occupy an increasing percentage of leadership positions, in America they hold less than a fifth of positions in both the public and private sectors. The United States ranks 78th in the world for women's representation in political office. In politics, although women constitute a majority of the electorate, they account for only 18 percent of Congress, 10 percent of governors, and 12 percent of mayors of the nation's 100 largest cities. In academia, women account for a majority of college graduates, but only about a quarter of full professors and university presidents. In law, women are almost half of law school graduates, but only 17 percent of the equity partners of major firms, and 22 percent of Fortune 500 general counsels. In business, women constitute a third of MBA graduates, but only 5 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs.
(<https://law.stanford.edu/directory/deborah-l-rhode/>)

Rhodes (2018) further indicates that while organizations will gain from increasing gender equity in leadership, women's underrepresentation is continuous. She investigates the reasons and suggests they include women's family roles, exclusion from professional development networks and unconscious gender bias.

With this introduction I hope to have set the stage that highlights the noteworthy progress women have made since entering the workforce and in the attainment of

professional and middle-managerial roles once only deemed for men. Yet, strongly emphasize that to the contrary, progress has been significantly slow for women as it pertains to the realization of senior level leadership roles. Based on research I highlight from Oakley, 2000; McEldowney, et al., 2009 and additional research I will highlight from Schein, 2001; Fels, 2004; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Powell, 2011; Ryan, et al., 2011; Ely & Kolb, 2013; Johns, 2013; Schwanke, 2013; O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Northouse, 2016; Lublin, 2016; Kubu, 2017; Seo, et al., 2017; Carnevale, et al., 2018; Offerman & Foley, 2020, a contributing factor to this stagnant progress is a result of structural and societal gender stereotypes ingrained in us early on. Perhaps still in existence since the “Great Man Theory” and which continue to restrict some women’s access to senior leadership roles.

Benefits of Having Women at the Realm

These findings are grave as gender stereotypes jeopardizes not only gender equity in the workforce and future generations of women leaders, but the prosperity of our economy (Catalyst, 2004; Catalyst 2011; Coates, 2011; Dezso & Ross, 2012; Schwanke, 2013; Mercer, 2014; Adler, 2015; Seo, et al., 2017; Hoobler, et al., 2018; Offerman & Foley, 2020). Research suggests that companies that have women at the realm, or in top leadership roles are more profitable than those that don’t. Findings from a 2004 Catalyst study suggests that companies with the highest representation of women on their top management teams experience better financial performance than companies with lower women representation. Similarly, a comparison of economic results conducted by Catalyst (2011) for the time period of 2004 to 2008, looked at the financial performance of Fortune 500 Companies that had three or more Women Board Directors (WBD). Study

findings indicate that companies that sustained at least three or more Women Board of Directors for a period of four to five years significantly outperform those companies that did not. Results are as follows: 1) *Companies with three or more WBD in four of five years outperformed companies with zero WBD by 84% on return of sales*, 2) *Companies with three or more WBD in four of five years outperformed companies with zero WBD by 60 % on return on invested capital*, and 3) *Companies with three or more WBD in four of five years outperformed companies with zero WBD by 46% on return on equity*. Via a 2012 data investigation, Dezsó and Ross indicate that “with other conditions remaining the same a given firm generates on average one percent (or over \$40 million) more economic value with at least one-woman on its top management team than without any women on its top management team and also enjoys superior accounting performance” (p. 13). A 2018 meta-analysis conducted by Hoobler, et al., falls in the same trend as it proposes that having women on firms’ boards of directors had a positive association with overall financial performance. Per Lublin (2016), “a study released in 2016 and covering 21,980 public companies in 91 countries found the same strong connection between the presence of female corporate leaders and firms increase profitability” (p. 15). Seo, et al., (2017), evaluate a 2007 study conducted by Welbourne, Cychota, and Ferrante, where 534 companies were assessed. Similarly, findings from this study suggest that appointing women on top management roles increases an organization short- and long-term financial performance. In addition, Welbourne, et al., (2007) indicate that having higher gender diversity provides role models for “high-potential women” and as a result this allows them “to fill impending shortfalls of talent, and retaining or attracting the most qualified people to serve in leadership positions” (p. 2).

There are factors related on how women lead that contribute to an organization's success and with that, its financial gains. Based on a 2014 study by Mercer, a consulting firm that tracks employment issues, Lublin (2016) offers that female manager are considered stronger than male managers in terms of flexibility and adaptability to change and hardship. Coates (2011), proposes that women have abilities and skills that are diplomatic in nature and this is key to successful organizational leadership. Adler (2015), suggests that women leaders exhibit a new sought after 21st century leadership style that incorporates more inclusive, trustworthy and humanistic approach. Further, Ayman and Korabik (2015), indicate that women global leaders possess self-awareness, self-confidence, authenticity, cultural acumen and relationship building, all providing a social foundation for effective global leadership. Similarly, Seo, et al., (2017) evaluate research conducted by Manning (2002), Koenig (2011) and Paustian-Underdahl et al., (2014) that focuses on the advantages of having female leaders at the realm. Findings from the various studies they evaluated considers there is growing evidence that suggests female leaders are more transformational in comparison to men leaders. This as a result providing a positive impact on business growth prospects and employee morale. In spite of these findings and the benefits that women in senior leadership roles may add to organizations, as pointed out by different research, many of the challenge's women faced when entering the workforce in 1840 while diluted, exist today.

On the next section of my literature review I will explain why this is still occurring. I will touch on how structural and societal gender stereotypes hinder women's career progression. I will highlight the hidden challenges women face as they aim to move up the corporate ladder, with women's family responsibilities playing a

contributing factor. Finally, I will elaborate on the pay disadvantages women encounter as a result of these combined factors.

Challenges: Why Is This Issue Still Occurring?

Structural & Societal Gender Stereotypes

Researchers have explored this issue seriously and suggest that gender stereotypes structurally ingrained in our culture play a significant role in the challenges women encounter as they aim to access and attain senior leadership roles. Scholars such as Virginia E. Schein, have studied gender equity in leadership. In her 2001 article, Schein looks at women in management and the barriers that exist in placing more women in these leadership roles worldwide. She believes there is a strong need to look at the “think manager-think male” phenomenon from a global perspective and examine the limitations for women wanting to reach senior level managerial roles from the international arena lens. She indicates that the “think manager-think male” stereotype from the 1970’s can still foster bias against women in managerial placement, promotions, etc.

In highlighting Schein’s work, Eagly and Sczesny (2009) look at stereotypes of leaders and suggest that these stereotypes are similar to the stereotypes our culture has about men. They propose that “Traditional stereotypes about leaders are predominantly masculine in their emphasis on agentic qualities” (p. 25). However, they don’t find this emphasis surprising as the majority of people assuming leadership roles have been men. Authors further indicate that while the percentage of women in management, business and financial occupations has risen from 18% in 1972, to 43% in 2007, this increase has not displaced men from management roles. As a result, culturally masculine qualities

continue to be well represented in leadership. Therefore, while women have made progress in these types of roles, there is little evidence of the change in gender stereotypes that view men as better suited for leadership roles. These structural gender and leadership stereotypes placing aspiring women leaders at a disadvantage. One that curtails the access and attainment of senior leadership positions.

Powell (2011) examines sex, gender and work. In his examination he suggests that while the role of women in the workplace has been expanding worldwide, “the glass ceiling” a metaphor used to acknowledge barriers to advancement in a profession, “appears to restrict women’s access to top management positions solely because they are women” (p. 3). In addition, he indicates that “Leader and gender stereotypes put aspiring female leaders at a distinct disadvantage by forcing them to deal with the perceived incongruity between the leader role by displaying predominantly female characteristics, they fail to meet the requirements of leader stereotype” (p. 132). Powell (2011) connects gender stereotypes ingrained in us to the: 1) beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people, and 2) sexism. Which he describes as prejudice displayed towards members of one sex which leads to a negative outcome for women seeking careers traditionally viewed as male dominated. In evaluating leader preferences, Powell (2011) shares results from a poll obtained in 2006 where “twice as many Americans” indicated that if they were getting a new job, they would prefer a male manager. He too proposes that the “think manager-think male” phenomenon still exists locally and internationally, and believes it is important to recognize these stereotypes as they place aspiring women at a disadvantage.

Taking what some would view as the brave approach, Higgins (2018) calls it like it is. She brings back the term “patriarchy”, a Greek word meaning “rule of the father”. This term was abandoned over a decade ago. However, it was brought back to light very recently with the #MeeToo campaign as there is a need to name what women are still struggling with. “It is not simple, in fact, to produce a concise definition of patriarchy. But at its simplest, it conveys the existence of a societal structure of male supremacy that operates at the expense of women...” (Higgins, 2018). In addressing the glass ceiling and the lack of women in positions of power, Politico Magazine (2019) also calls out “patriarchy” and indicates that it’s the biggest challenge women face in the US today. The 2019 article states:

Regardless of a woman’s experience, education or abilities, the patriarchal nature of U.S. society fosters the perception that women are less qualified and less competent than men. What patriarchy has done is convince people that a strong and intelligent woman represents a problem; a disruption to the social order rather than an integral part of it...

This is grave for women’s career advancements as perceptions about women’s abilities continue to be persistent and contributing to the glass ceiling. Irrespective of women’s education, experience, capacities and even civil rights acts that have been put into place to address it, the patriarchal nature of the US society prevails.

In evaluating the “glass ceiling”, Johns (2013) touches upon Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, where Congress enacted the Glass Ceiling Act, establishing the Glass Ceiling Commission. The commission had several purposes including determining how businesses filled managerial and decision-making positions and review of compensation programs. In highlighting the commission’s findings, Johns (2013) indicates that “The impenetrable barriers between women and the executive suite were subsequently

reaffirmed in the fact-finding report issued by the Glass Ceiling Commission in 1995. At that time, the commission noted that only 3 to 5 percent of senior management positions in Fortune 500 companies were filled by women” (p. 2). They reported several barriers to the success of women reaching the top levels of management including “societal, governmental, internal business, and business structural barriers” (p. 3). In addition, they found that compensation for women in senior positions was lower than their male counterparts.

In addition to the “glass ceiling”, Northouse (2016) suggests that the “glass cliff” a term used when women are appointed to leadership position associated with greater risk or disapproval is also a significant issue. He states “women are disproportionately represented in business position that are less visible, have less responsibility and do not lead to top leadership positions. Relatedly, when women are promoted to leadership positions, they are more likely than men to be placed on a “glass cliff,” appointed to precarious leadership situation associated with greater risk and criticism” (p. 401). The glass cliff term viewed as “think crisis- think female” by Ryan, et al., (2011), who based on a study they conducted suggest that “women may be favored in times of poor performance, not because they are expected to improve the situation, but because they are seen to be good people managers and can take the blame for organizational failure” (p. 470).

The fact that women are seen to be particularly suited to management responsibilities in the context of poor company performance does lead to the “female advantage”. Nonetheless, the female advantage may have unfortunate consequences leading some women in these roles towards the “glass cliff” of failure. Offerman and

Foley (2020) suggest that “Although the percentage of women managers has risen in many places around the world, it appears that gender equality remains an elusive goal, as age-old beliefs that men are more qualified than women for leadership die hard...gender inequality and gender discrimination remain very real challenges for women workers in general, and especially so for women striving for leadership positions” (p. 1). Lublin (2016) indicates that “Stereotypes persist about women’s leadership capabilities. Few male chief executives personally commit themselves and hold their lieutenants accountable for elevating women...Unintentional but subtle practices create barriers, such as backlash that women experience from negotiating hard for themselves” (p. 20). In addition, Lublin (2016) suggests that “unconscious biases cause barriers that can impede the advancement of individuals because the hidden beliefs frequently influence critical workplace decisions” (p. 244).

In evaluating the lack of women in senior leadership roles, Seo, et al., (2017) propose that there is an unequal social status among genders, where women are granted lower status than men. This social status produces expectations on gender differences and this results in an underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles. Quoting work from Singh and Terjesen (2008), Seo, et al., (2017) state “Fundamentally, patriarchal society established work roles based on gender, resulting in the development of “work designed by men and for men” which contributed to gender discrimination and stereotyping” (p. 39). This historical factor established a division of labor between men and women which jeopardizes women’s ability to access and attain senior leadership roles. What is more, as it lingers, it will inevitably create a domino effect that will result

in the continued underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles (Seo, et al., 2017).

Second generation gender bias is also a contributing factor to the barriers women face in the access and attainment of senior leadership roles. Kubu (2017) implies that first generation gender bias is markedly diminished, although not eliminated and that we are far from equity in the promotion of women in leadership roles. In quoting Ibarra, Ely & Kolb (2013), she indicates that “one possible explanation is the concept of implicit or ‘second generation’ bias. Unlike first generation bias which entailed the deliberate exclusion of women from leadership roles, second-generation bias is subtler and stems from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns or interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage” (p. 240). Second-generation gender bias can perhaps be more detrimental to women’s career progression given it is hidden, subtle, and silent. For example, second-generation gender bias can view women who naturally act strong, as too assertive or perhaps harsh. In this case women are viewed as too masculine; their femininity would come under attack, and they would not be viewed as suited for leadership roles. I’ll explore the attack on women’s femininity a bit more on the next section. On the contrary, if women portray themselves as kind and understanding they are viewed as weak, and again not suited for leadership roles. It is too often that women are forced to walk a balancing act in order to fit in as leaders, a consequence of second-generation gender bias. As a woman in a leadership role, I too have experienced second-generation gender bias, at times without knowing. My collaborative leadership approach, a quality of transformational leaders, was at one point criticized as being too soft. I recall being asked by the department chair,

a man in the role, to be more assertive. Questioning his request, I asked if he believed we would have accomplished many of the successful outcomes for our department if I would have used an assertive approach vs a collaborative one. He could not answer that question, yet I assured him I would try and follow his advice. During that time, a family commitment took me away from the office for a couple of days. Given it was a busy budget season I left my finance officer in charge. A difficult issue in the department arose, and she handled it quiet assertively. This as a result significantly upset people involved and nor she, nor the department chair, were able to curtail the situation. Upon my return to the office, I resolved the issue using my authentic and transformational leadership approach. I felt reassured when the department chair recognized that my collaborative leadership approach was ideal, and I should continue exercising it. However, second-generation gender bias indeed questioned it!

A women's femininity also comes into attack as women seek to break the glass ceiling. Fels (2004), looks at what may be dashing women's career dreams and the hidden barriers attached to these. She suggests that while women are no longer denied access to training, they come up against barriers jeopardizing to their ambitions and these barriers posing a significant attack to their femininity. In order to be seen as feminine a standard of our society, women must relinquish resources, including recognition. Therefore, they aim to not attract too much attention to themselves when it comes to celebrating their accomplishments. I can personally attest to this as in times of recognition instead of celebrating my professional accomplishments and even flaunting them as a marketing mechanism of my leadership skills, I usually downgrade not to place too much attention to myself. Further, Fels (2004) suggests that "When women speak as

much as men in a work situation or compete for high-visibility positions, their femininity is routinely assailed. They are caricatured as either asexual and unattractive or promiscuous and seductive. Something must be wrong with their sexuality” (p. 27).

Finally, Fels (2004) indicates that while women now have greater opportunities to pursue their goals, doing so is “socially condoned” if they don’t first meet the needs of their family members. “If this requirement is not met, women’s ambitions as well as their femininity will be called to question” (p. 33).

Gender stereotypes may also play a negative role as women aim to develop their leadership approach. Hopkins and O’Neil (2015) argue that “a gendered representation of leadership is not gender-neutral and is especially challenging for women” (p. 3). They indicate the challenge comes from women being caught between unrealistic choices when it relates to leadership and can’t truly exercise as their authentic self. They state “If they are highly ambitious and self-confident (agentic behaviors typically associated with men), then women may be criticized for lacking communal qualities; and if they are highly communal (helpful or friendly, typically associated with women), then women may be criticized for not being agentic enough” (p. 3). Aydin (2020) looks at this very topic and concurs that “Women are faced with dilemmas about how to practice authentic leadership when the definition is oriented towards a stereotypical perspective” and further reminds us that organizations are gendered entities that require women to fit into male-dominated environments. Therefore, in developing a leadership identity, women must navigate how to be their authentic selves and effective leaders, while operating under a stereotypical environment that has defined leadership roles as masculine.

Nearly a decade after McEldowney, et al., (2009) findings, similarly, Carnevale, et al., (2018) indicate that the educational advances of women over the past four decades have been significant. Women have leaned on education as their primary strategy for achieving economic progress, with approximately 3 million more women currently enrolled in postsecondary education in comparison to men. Despite this progress Carnevale, et al., (2018) suggest that the “deep-rooted societal beliefs about differences in competencies between the sexes continue to impact labor market outcomes for many women” (p. 9). While the different literature I reviewed named this structural gender stereotype differently (ie, glass ceiling, glass cliff, think-male- think-manger, think-crisis think-female, second generation gender bias, etc.), the fact remains that women are underrepresented in senior leadership roles as a result of gender stereotypes that have followed our society for centuries. Gender stereotypes that don’t view women as suited for senior leadership roles as compared to men. As a result, curtailing women’s access and attainment of such roles.

Other Hidden Challenges

There are however, other hidden challenges surrounding gender stereotypes women face as they aim to grow in their careers. Ibarra and Obodaru, authors of a 2019 Harvard Business Review article, drew research from five-years’ worth of data captured by Insead’s executive education program, where 2,816 executives from 140 countries participated in a 360-degree exercise. Assessments evaluated women’s leadership ability and in this case Ibarra and Obodaru (2019) were surprised with their findings as they suggest that a group of women outshined men in most of the leadership dimensions measured. However, they received lower scores on “envisioning”, described by the

authors as “the ability to recognize new opportunities and trends in the environment and develop new strategic direction for an enterprise” (p. 51). A factor that may be jeopardizing women and the advancement of their careers. In the words of Ibarra and Obodaru (2019), “Women may diminish the importance of vision, and they may be reassured by the many claims made over the years about their superior emotional intelligence, but the fact remains that women are a minority in the top ranks of business organization...findings suggest to us that the shortfall is in no small part due to women’s perceived lack of vision...the challenge facing women, then, is to stop diminishing the vision thing and make vision one of the things they are known for” (p. 65-66). This is a significant factor. Leaders regardless of gender must have a vision and plan accordingly. Without a vision, regardless of a leadership approach, they will fail to make important decisions and meet organizational needs.

Family Responsibilities and Pay Disadvantage

In addition to structural gender and leadership stereotypes, women’s femininity attacked, and perceived lack of vision that place women at a career disadvantage, Babcock and Laschever (2009) find that women with families do 2/3 of all household work, have less free time and higher stress levels. In addition, women hold major responsibility for childcare and family needs. Alike, bell hooks (2000) advises that on the contrary to men, women with family responsibilities while also contributing to the workforce, have found that they work long hours at home and long hours at the job. This unequal responsibility is a result of societal gender stereotypes that place women as the main care takers for their family and household. This is confirmed by Carnevale, et al., (2018), who look at the time women spend in childcare in comparison to men. They

suggest that “in keeping with societal expectations, mothers still spend more time caring for children within the household and on average for children under 18, fathers spend 0.9 hours per day in child care activities compared to mothers, who spend almost twice as much (1.76 hours per day) on child care” (p. 34). A 2013 study conducted by the [Pew Research Center](#) found that 51% of working women in comparison to 16% of men, with children under the age of 18 found it hard to advance in their careers while being a working parent. Schwanke (2013) finds that these cultural expectations interrupt a women’s ability to expand their human capital. This represents skills, experience and knowledge that is usually gained through regular employment and imperative for career advancement (Hein & Cassirer, 2010; Schwanke, 2013; Oschenfeld, 2017; Lublin, 2016). Seo, et al., (2017) suggest that “women’s assigned roles associated with family responsibilities are perceived as hindrances to their desire for career advancement; therefore, women are less likely to become involved in corporate networks where access to influential people is present” (p. 40). Networking is known to be a contributing factor to career mobility. Consequently, not being able to participate in corporate networks hampers a women’s ability to move up the corporate ladder. In addition, reliable childcare is also an issue for women. In the International Labor Organization 2010 report, authors Hein and Cassirer indicate that “As women are often the parent with major responsibility for children, lack of access to affordable, reliable childcare can be a major factor in gender inequality, undermining women’s ability to work and their opportunities for employment” (p. 8). In some cases, this leading to poverty (Budlender, 2011).

Women face additional factors that place them at a disadvantage when it relates to pay. The [Pew Research Center](#) 2018 data confirms that women earn 83% as much as

what men earned per hour in similar jobs. This pay discrepancy is associated to multiple factors, but most prevalent surrounds gender stereotypes that place women on the lower paying scale. According to bell hooks (2000), while women gained more rights relative to salaries and positions as a result of feminist protest, this gain did not completely eliminate gender discrimination. Nor did it gain equal pay for equal work. She states “In many college classrooms today students both female and male will argue that feminist movement is no longer relevant since women now have equality. They do not even know that on the average most women still do not get equal pay for equal work...” (p. 49). Sociology expert Nicky Lisa Cole, Ph.D. (2019), looks at why gendered gaps in pay and wealth exist. She indicates that pay inequalities result from “historically rooted gender bias” that are still in existence today. She further states:

Though many Americans would claim otherwise, these data clearly show that the vast majority of us, regardless of gender, view men’s labor as more valuable than women. This often unconscious or subconscious assessment of labor value is influenced strongly by biased perceptions of individual qualities thought to be determined by gender. These often break down as gendered binaries that directly favor men (ThoughtCo.com).

Other factors surrounding inequitable pay are connected to women disinclination to negotiate their salaries and selecting jobs in fields that historically pay less. A 2003 Carnegie Mellon University study of 78 master’s degree students conducted by Linda Babcock, found that just 12.5% of women negotiated for their starting salary, versus 52% of men. In addition, per Glassdoor, a recruiting and employment placing firm, 54% of the gender pay gap is associated with the differences in jobs men and women hold and the industries in which they work. This is confirmed by Oschenfeld (2017), who looks at why men are overrepresented in well-paid fields and women disproportionately graduate from

fields that have a lower earning potential in the labor markets. She indicates that horizontal sex segregation in higher education contributes significantly to economic gender inequality. Her findings further suggest that gender role theory plays a part in the labor markets and concludes that gender patterns of self-selection that derive from men's socialization into the breadwinner role rather than the discrimination of women. Results further suggest that women disproportionately self-select into careers that will have lower earning potential due to employment interruptions for the bearing and carrying of family. Carnevale et al., (2018) similarly suggest that these societal expectations that place women as the main care takers have consequences for women's earning potential as they may lead women to select lower paying careers in comparison to men. They state "Disparities in pay are only symptoms of deep-seated biases and social pressures that affect women's decisions to gravitate to certain occupations, courses of study, and majors. These, in turn, have a powerful effect on women's economic bargaining power and lifelong earning potential" (p. 33). Along these lines, Lublin (2016) suggests that "women hesitate to raise our hands for higher level promotions fearful of disrupting our already hectic and complicated lives" (p. 22). As a result, women unconsciously building their own glass ceiling.

Key Success Factors: How Can The Situation Be Improved?

While literature highlighting key factors contributing to the career advancement of women was limited, available research indicates that women who advance in their careers and reach senior leadership roles have key attributes that allowed them to succeed in their field. They have a strong academic background, mentors guiding them along the way, practice resilience, exercise their soft skills, are transformational and lead

authentically. Most significantly they take ownership of their careers by making an identity shift that allows them to view themselves as leaders and move towards the path of their professional goals. These are confident women that take risks and move barriers in spite of hearing “No” along the way. (Rimm, 1999; Ibarra, et al., 2013; Sandberg, 2013; Lublin, 2016; Stevenson & Orr, 2017; Abrams, 2019; Wardell, 2020). Nonetheless, what instills some women to have the confidence needed to achieve success in their careers?

Learning and Development From a Young Age

Confidence is a sense of self-assurance that comes from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities. Killelea (2016) defines confidence as an attitude that attracts success and can be viewed as a skill set that grows when nourished. One that allows us to set expectations for ourselves and what we can accomplish. Therefore, if we want to cultivate confident women, we must instill confidence in our daughters early on and allow them to expand their vision for their future. Research shows that the learning and development of young girls starts at a very young age. Values from culture and family are pre-conditioning girls and as a result affecting women's career choices (Rimm, 1999). Therefore, to contribute to the career success of women it is imperative that we start grooming them early in life as young girls. We must help shape the future of our daughters by setting high educational expectations, viewing them as intelligent, good thinkers, problem solvers whom value work and can accomplish anything they set their mind to (Rimm, 1999). These are concepts we need to look at and exercise carefully as we raise young girls. After all, and in the words of Susan Widham, President of Beech-

Nutritional Corporation, “Good Little Girls Shatter Glass Ceilings” (Rimm, 1999, p. 92).

Authentic and Transformational Leadership

In addition, Rimm (1999) advises we raise our daughters to be confident, brave, authentic and transformational women. Reassure them that the leadership characteristics that are gender-stereotyped as female don’t necessarily interfere with career success. On the contrary, they should embrace these characteristics to benefit their careers and exercise those critical “soft skills” associated with listening, communicating effectively and with emotional intelligence that women tend to possess when leading. Exercising authenticity and those critical soft skills that allow women to be transformational when leading has been deemed an important approach to the path of career success (Rimm, 1999; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Paludi & Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). Paludi and Coates (2011) indicate that “a majority of successful women defined leadership in terms of being effective listeners and communicators, facilitating collaboration and change, and empowering others” and ask if this is why females are reaching the top levels of organizations across society at a more common rate.

We are indeed in a time where social skills “the soft skills” associated with authentic and transformational leadership are just as important as business acumen, with suitable women able to deliver on both (Krishnan & Park, 2005; Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015). This suggests that the leadership styles that women possess are positively contributing to the effective management of the members of the organization they lead. These “feeling” cognitive style leadership approach that emphasizes harmony (Krishnan & Park, 2005), are often sought out by companies that are in situations of “crisis” as these

allow leaders to handle challenging situations involving other people (Hurley & Chaudhary, 2016). In these instances, “women are more likely than men to be perceived as leaders by group members in environments that call for a lot of social interaction...this style is likely to enable women to inspire confidence among peers and subordinates” (Krishnan & Park, 2005, p. 1713).

Leaders are only as great as their team and to ensure success, they must inspire trust and empower transparency! Fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, excellence and the nurturing of talented staff is a key component to the realization of any leadership role and the organization it supports. From the beginning of my career, I knew that engaged staff is key to an organization’s success. Therefore, I embraced the approach of collaboration and partnership early on. This approach, along with leading as an authentic and transformational leader is what I strongly stand by. Practicing soft skills, while leading in an authentic and transformational way has been key to my leadership abilities. This approach has not only allowed me to lead effectively but has opened the doors to career advancement.

“If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”

~Shirley Chisholm~

Constructing a Leadership Identity

As we consider women's "soft skills" and their "leadership style" it is important to know that women can be true to themselves as they no longer have to mimic the leadership styles of men in order to be successful in their roles. Dr. Mary J. Wardell (2020) states that "your identity, your gender, and your race, are part of your secret power; it's your magic. Your identity makes you unique in what you do and informs how you lead. Identity matters" (p. 35). Therefore, an identity shift must take place for many women in order to be transformational and lead with authenticity. An internal shift in thinking that is also critical in the realization that skilled women can indeed be successful leaders. Researchers such as Ibarra, Ely and Kolb (2013) view this identity shift as critical in the path to career advancement. They indicate that persistent gender bias disrupts the learning process of becoming a leader. They state, "Becoming a leader involves much more than being put in a leadership role, acquiring new skills, and adapting one's style to the requirements of that role. It involves a fundamental identity shift" (p. 4). This mentality would also attract skilled women to senior leadership roles they did not believe they were capable of performing. In a 2017 Harvard Business Review article, authors Stevenson and Orr, interview 57 women CEOs to find out how more women can get to senior level leadership roles. They indicate that despite a woman's potential, some women don't see themselves as future CEOs. From the 57 female CEOs they interviewed they reveal that "two-thirds said they didn't realize they could be CEO until someone else told them, describing themselves as intensely focused on driving results rather than on their advancement and success" (p. 4). Stevenson and Orr (2017) further suggest that recognition by a boss or mentor was what sparked this

ambition in many of the women. Perhaps also sparking an identity shift that allowed these women to seek advancement in their careers. Ibarra, et al., (2013) indicate that traditional mentoring and leadership education programs aid in this identity shift, but they are not enough and provide three additional actions that can be incorporated to help women gain a sense of themselves as leaders. They are: “1) *educate women and men about second-generation gender bias*, 2) *create safe “identity workspaces” to support transitions to bigger roles*, and 3) *anchor women’s development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose rather than how women are perceived*. These actions will give women insight into themselves and their organizations, enabling them to more effectively chart a course to leadership” (p. 5).

Kapasi, Sang and Sitko (2016), aim to understand how high-profile women leaders construct their leadership identity. With this they suggest that leadership theories have contributed to viewing leadership from a trait to a social construction. Further, that there is an interest in viewing leadership from a gender perspective while taking into consideration the under-represented number of women in leadership positions. In learning how high-profile women leaders construct a gender leadership identity, the authors aimed to understanding the gender social construction of leadership using authentic leadership theory. This leadership theory suggests that “the gender of a leader is no longer of importance as the criteria for authenticity is to act in accordance with one’s true self” (p. 340). By analyzing the autobiographies of four high profile women (Sheryl Sandberg, Karren Brady, Hillary Clinton and Julia Gillard), their findings indicate that the four women constructed their gender and leadership identity along familiar lines. The authors use as examples family and personal values, responsibility to other women and

the next generations, long-term impact and personal role models. Kapasi, Sang and Sitko (2016), do make an important note that “all the women studied occupy positions of considerable social privilege” as such they emphasize that “further nuanced analysis of privilege and its role in shaping gendered understandings and performances of leadership is needed” (p. 15). However, in spite of their social privilege, their findings conclude that these four women engaged in authentic leadership, outlining that their identity as women has had a positive impact on their careers and leadership approaches to their roles.

In my first management role I believed that in order to be successful I had to practice leadership traits that were firm and authoritative. However, in taking this leadership approach I was not going to be true to my identity as a woman and would also run the risk of failing to properly lead my team. As a result, my personal values would be tainted and that is not how I wanted to be seen. I wanted to lead with authenticity, yet I struggled because I believed an authoritative approach was expected of me. In practicing authenticity, Abrams (2019) indicates that the key to leadership is finding balance between fitting in and being authentic... “embracing your authentic self means being clear about how you wish to be seen. This does not mean feigning a personality that is artificial and then cutting loose at home. It means bringing forth who we really are while being acutely aware of our surroundings” (p. 43). I was fortunate at that time to be under the leadership of a wise and kind director. In reassuring words, he expressed that he hired me for my leadership skills. He advised I practice them and not the leadership approach of others. I did not know at that time this advice would open the doors to my ability to exercise authentic and transformational leadership and pave a path towards building a

successful leadership identity. One that has had a positive impact on my career and leadership approach.

In addition to taking on an identity shift and building your leadership identity, it's important not to fall into the impostor syndrome upon the attainment of these roles. Rose Sherman, RN (2013) suggests impostor syndrome is a mentality that may hold some women back as they don't believe their success is earned, or has merit to their experience, skills or other qualities. Instead, they believe it is based on luck or timing. Sherman (2013) further suggests that impostor syndrome "is most common among women leaders who feel they don't deserve the success they've achieved despite external evidence of their competence...and can be traced to early family or school dynamics, when a child received mixed messages about competency and individual achievements" (p. 57-58). Dr. Mary J. Wardell (2020) dives into this topic as well and indicates that for women of color this syndrome may be more exacerbated as they "receive societal messages of not belonging or not being good enough" (p. 103). I can attest to the fact that moving away from impostor syndrome mode and exercising confidence in one's self is critical to career advancement. In my professional career I've been in many situations where I've had to incorporate an identity shift, and believe in my skills as a leader in order for others to believe in me as well. This has allowed not only for career advancement, but the trust from those I lead, and backing from those I follow!

Resilience

Successful women learned resilience (Rimm, 1999), and this too starts at a young age. We must teach our daughters the value of being challenged by new experiences and impose on them that the intellectual skills of women are making a positive difference in

society. Educate them to insist for equal treatment, and challenge them to be creative and outside the box thinkers (Rimm, 1999). Investment in our daughters is starting to pay off as young women today are exercising resilience and “can-do” attitudes in their path towards career advancement and not allowing obstacles such as gender discrimination get in their way. While young female leaders of today experience a number of factors they feel inhibit their ability to lead effectively and the challenges they experience today are consistent with similar studies conducted more than a decade ago; these young women perceive the challenges of attaining leadership roles quite differently. They don’t view the effects of discrimination as an obstacle preventing them to reach and become effective leaders (Eldowney, et al., 2009). What is more, “young women are developing an attitude that discrimination is something they must challenge and overcome, but not a factor preventing them from aspiring to top leadership positions” (Eldowney, et al., 2009, p. 29). This indicates a great deal of resilience, perseverance and ambitious attitude; an attribute that successful women enjoy.

Abrams (2019) gives insight on how to achieve success in spite of adversity. Being a woman of color, she indicates opportunity was not easy for her. However, with resilience and dedication, on May 2017 she became the first woman and person of color to make it to the general election ballot as the gubernatorial candidate. If elected would have been the first woman of color to serve as governor in the US. She has also been extremely influential at ensuring that minorities or those of underprivileged backgrounds organize and vote. When asked by women, young leaders and people of color, quote “those who are told they are not supposed to be in charge”, how she got to where she is at, her response is sincere. She states “No one born into the minority has the luxury of

giving up, even when we do not win enough of the time” and challenges them towards the path or realizing ambition and dare to want more. In addition, Abrams (2019) proposes that no matter how much preparation we do, sometimes we are going to fail and our task is to embrace the failure. She states “failing forward, that is taking risks and potentially falling short, has a utility. Invention, discovery, and empires are built of chances taken with high degrees of failure” (p. 142).

Career Ownership

“Be ready to step into your power when the time is right” advises Dr. Mary J. Wardell (2020). Taking risks has proven to advance the careers of ambitious and resilient women. In their study of 57 women CEOs Stevenson and Orr (2017) looked at specific traits that are essential to women’s success. Through their assessments, a combination of four traits and competencies emerged as key to their success: courage, risk-taking, resilience, and managing ambiguity. For highly ambitious women many times taking chances means taking on high-risk positions in struggling organizations. While taking on these challenges can be promising for struggling organizations and potentially open the doors of advancement to highly ambitious women, it can come with a cost to these very women if not executed correctly as these high-risk positions can potentially lead women to the glass cliff of failure (Haslam, et al., 2011; Offerman & Foley, 2020). Non the less, “highly ambitious women managers may also view such high-risk situations to be more of an opportunity to prove their leadership skills and climb up the management ladder” (Hurley & Chaudhary, 2016, p. 253). This is an example of aspiring women taking ownership of their careers and moving towards the path of their professional goals. They

are not viewing the high-risk role as a challenge or the “glass cliff” of failure, but as an opportunity to advance in their career.

When conducting research for my master’s thesis, I had the opportunity to interview thirteen women in leadership roles. One of these women was in the role of Chief Administrative Officer, at a Northern California University. What was impressive about her was that in the span of a couple of years she progressed considerably in her career moving up the corporate ladder at a rapid rate. When I asked what helped her progress in her career, she indicated that it was her ability and willingness to take risks on career opportunities at hand. The personal advice she gave me was to take risks and aim for my next career goal even if I thought I was not ready. If I did not, I may lose a really good opportunity at career advancement. “After all, you will never know what happens unless you try” (Martin, 2010, p. 17). Being a highly ambitious woman I took her advice, took a risk and too experienced desired career mobility. Abrams (2019) indicates that ambition means pushing ourselves past what we are good at and stretch ourselves to our full potential. In realizing ambition we must determine: 1) *What do I want?*, 2) *Why do I want it?* and 3) *How do I get there?*. However, similar to an identity shift approach, she urges her mentees that before considering these steps it is “crucial to understand and internalize our very right to even be ambitious. Because, for too many of us, we are stopped in our tracks before we begin because we don’t believe we deserve to want more. And it is by wanting more that we begin” (p. 7).

Mentors and Sponsors

Mentors and sponsors also play an important role in the career advancement of women. These are usually experienced professionals that guide a less experienced

professional from a more senior viewpoint. Lublin (2016) indicates that “countless women have seen their careers soar thanks to help from a powerful senior executive” (p. 176). This professional relationship can take place in a formal or informal structure, with both methods providing a rich opportunity for career growth. Abrams (2019), who finds the idea of a traditional mentors limiting, indicates she sought curated support, training, and advice from an array of alliances, advisors and friends. From the thirteen women leaders I interviewed for my master’s thesis, when I asked “*If they had a mentor or someone who was a special influence in their professional life?*”, ten out of the thirteen indicated they had mentors throughout their careers via a formal or informal setting. From these ten women leaders, all suggested they found mentors to be beneficial to their careers (Martin, 2010). Lublin (2016) is in the same thinking and indicates that managerial women eager for success need to connect themselves with an array of different supporters and seek both “high-level male supporters, and high-level female allies and advocates” (p.184). The benefit of having an advisor does not end once you have reached a senior level leadership role. Upon the attainment of senior leadership positions, sponsors, someone usually in an executive level, are just as crucial. “Mentors build a woman’s self-esteem and serve as an empathetic sounding board, but sponsors expend valuable chips on a woman’s behalf and provide air cover so she can take risks” suggests Lublin (2016, p. 176). Stevenson and Orr (2017) indicate that “when women reach the senior executive level, crucial support relationships shift from mentors, who offer encouragement and advice, to sponsors, who take a hands-on role in managing career moves and promoting executives as potential CEOs” (p. 5). Furthermore, from the women they interviewed for their study, four women indicated a lack of sponsorship as a

“hindrance” to their career development. Nonetheless, while having a mentor or a sponsor on your corner is beneficial to your career, Lublin (2016) indicates that “formal mentoring and sponsorship programs remain far out of reach for many women” (p. 177). However, ambitious women that take ownership of their careers don’t let the lack of formal mentoring programs hinder their ability to seek mentorship support. Abrams (2019) suggests that too often the idea of mentors is self-limiting...particularly if your target is one woman who made it to the C-suite” (p. 82). Her advice is not to narrow our sense of what a mentor can be. Instead, aim to align with those that are already around us to “help hone our skills and build our leadership capacity” (p. 82). In my professional life, I have surrounded myself by an array of mentors both in a formal or informal setting. This approach has helped shape my career and contributed to my leadership style as I experienced diverse leadership perspectives. As I pay a forward and mentor and coach other women, I advise my mentees to practice a similar approach.

Organizational & Societal Responsibility

While most of the literature reviewed leans towards women’s individual responsibility for career advancement, it is imperative that we take into account organizational and societal responsibilities. O’Neil and Hopkins (2015), propose that in order to create a path for the career advancement of women into senior level leadership roles, a focus must be placed on the organizational and societal levels, not the individual level. They argue that “A focus on individual level issues, i.e., women lacking confidence and women opting out, detracts from the work that must be done at the organizational level in order to dismantle the system of pervasive, structural disadvantage facing women seeking to advance to senior leadership positions” (p. 1). They further argue that

regardless of women's level of confidence, the organizational deck is stacked against them as women have to combine both work and family responsibilities. Therefore, to contribute to women's career mobility, our "global society, structures and systems" must accommodate women's lives, not work against them. O'Neil and Hopkins (2015) believe that there needs to be a focus on breaking down and rebuilding the "systems and structures" that curtail women's access and attainment of senior leadership roles. To do so, they propose that we must recognize the bias and discrimination that undermine women at all levels of our organizations. We must question longstanding organizational norms that don't support women's roles. Finally, they propose that both women and men in leadership roles need to understand the importance of developing a diverse talent pool and find solutions to incorporating.

Denend, et al., (2020) look at gender perception in health technology and have a call to action. In their study which looks at gender diversity of health technology companies, they found that there is a "major gender imbalance in the senior leadership ranks of health technology companies"...and suggest that "women make up one-quarter or less of the senior leadership team...and only 10% of women are employed in companies with more than half female leaders" (p. 1583). Authors confirm that leaders in the health technology companies have begun to address the issues of gender and racial diversity. Yet, they plea that action should not only be left to the major players. This too must be addressed by academic programs focused in this field of study. They recommend that "by increasing awareness and understanding of gender stereotypes and unconscious bias among our trainees, universities can equip future technology leaders to build more inclusive workplaces as they go forward in their careers" (p. 1584).

Johns (2013) takes a broader approach and acknowledges that breaking the glass ceiling is complicated. She calls for action on numerous fronts including federal and state governments, employers, academic institutions, and women themselves. She views these combined efforts as essential in breaking down the barriers that are holding women back. In doing so, she proposes that governmental policy and legislation do more to dismantle discriminatory practices. Employers commit themselves to gender diversity and equity. Further, develop leadership programs specifically for women, where women can learn to build on their strengths. Academic institutions play a role as well and must move away from embracing leadership theories that are narrow in focus. Instead, they must equip themselves to address issues of social justice, diversity, and gender. Most significantly, Johns (2013) emphasizes that “Women need to continue advocating for themselves by creating their own social capital by developing networks of support, seeking sponsors within their workplace organizations, securing mentors, promoting themselves, and communicating the value that they bring to the workplace” (p. 9).

Specifically focusing on women of color, Dr. Wardelle (2020) proposes that women are armed to bring an organization into alignment via “truth telling with intention” (p. 75). She offers women can play a role in ensuring that organizations take corrective action by urging companies to pay attention to who is disproportionately impacted by policies implemented. In addition, she suggests that the “organizational culture” plays a role in determining the degree to which unconscious and implicit bias is tolerated or mitigated. Therefore, the more women know about the organizational culture, “the more they understand how much truth telling is required to bring the company into alignment with its cultural values ensuring that all may thrive” (p. 75).

This section of the literature review provided key factors on how structural gender stereotypes that inhibit talented women from reaching senior leadership roles can be curtailed. I concur with these findings and emphasize that as contributing members of our society we all have the right and responsibility to have and create an equitable workplace for men and women alike. This as a result contributing to the creation of opportunities that will provide driven women access to, and attainment of senior leadership roles. Emphasizing that organizational and societal responsibility should play a significant and leading role in the elimination of gender stereotypes, as individuals, we must indeed take action to contribute to our career progression. This call to action in the long-term will not only benefit the individual, like a domino effect it will positively impact the many!

Summary

A historical examination, backed up by current times findings, indicates that while women have made progress in the workforce and in the attainment of management roles, there is still the need for more representation of women in senior level leadership roles. Findings suggest that in the vast majority of cases the roadblocks women face as they aim for career advancement are connected to structural and societal gender stereotypes. Yet, research indicates that organizations greatly benefit from having women at the realm. Those women who do advance in their careers and reach senior leadership roles have key attributes that allowed them to succeed in their field. They have a strong academic background as a baseline, advisors guiding them along the way, practice resilience, exercise their soft skills and lead authentically. Most significantly they take ownership of their careers by making an identity shift that allows them to view themselves as leaders and moved towards the path of their professional goals.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

According to the [US Department of Labor, in 2018](#) women represented a significant number of the working population: 57.1% (approximately 66 million women). From this working population, 40% of women held positions in managerial or professional roles. This signifying noteworthy progress for women since entering the workforce in 1840. However, in spite of the progress women have made since entering the workforce, and today represent over half of the labor force, these numbers are not illustrative in senior level leadership roles across multiple fields. In this same year, only 6.6% of women held CEO positions in fortune 500 companies. Women in senior leadership roles representation was similar in other fields, with 22.2% noted as Fortune 500 board members, 25% US Senators, 23.4% US House, 28.6% State Legislative, 18% Governors, 26.1% Cabinet-level positions and in education 30.1% US college presidents were women. Given the challenges I have presented in my literature review surrounding gender stereotypes, the purpose of this qualitative study is to look at how women respond to these challenges as they navigate through their careers and ultimately the tools they used in order to successfully advance to senior level leadership roles.

As I approached this research my focus was to review literature that highlights these key categories and present my findings. In conducting the review of literature, I ran across an obstacle as I did not find much research that specifically focused on the success stories of women attaining senior leadership roles and the trajectory they took in getting

to such roles. Therefore, I noted this as a gap in this research area and need for further exploration. Yet, there is an abundance of literature that touched upon the challenges women face in reaching senior leadership positions and the factors influencing this phenomenon. In addition, there is literature that highlights key leadership attributes such as authentic and transformational leadership that are described as critical for leaders' success, and women are known to possess. As well as the necessary operational characteristics that can help develop women for senior level leadership positions. To continue building on this research, and address the areas of need, via this qualitative study I aimed to answer the following questions: *1) What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?, 2) What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?, and 3) What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?.* In further developing this area of research I will use these findings to help provide a stronger understanding of the challenges women face in their career trajectories, specifically those wanting to attain senior leadership roles. For those that have reached these desired senior leadership positions, understand how they accomplished the attainment of such, and what contributed to the success of their career, with each participant defining success in their own terms. The findings from this study can be significant to women in the workforce as it can contribute to building a pathway that will be useful for women aiming to advance in their careers, specifically those aspiring to attain senior leadership roles.

Research Design

Operating from an area of understanding, truth, reality and meaning, I conducted a qualitative study that explored both the context and human experience of individual women in leadership. I selected a qualitative approach as my research method for it permitted me to understand the lived experiences of the participants by exploring and reflecting on the unique perspectives of each. Qualitative research expert, Bhattacharya (2017) indicates that “qualitative research aims to work within the context of human experience and the ways in which meaning is made out of those experiences” (p. 6). She further suggests that qualitative researchers in this case conduct “in-depth inquiries within a small sample of population and usually work with interpreting people’s stories, experiences, or specific discourses” (p. 18).

The qualitative research methodology employed in this study involved a personal narrative approach where the soliciting of participant stories were implemented via a formal semi-structured interview approach as the primary method of inquiry. This narrative approach is a “retrospective first-person account of individual lives...that have served to introduce marginalized voices (e.g., those of women or globally subaltern people), and have provided counter narratives that dispute misleading generalizations or refute universal claims” (Mynes et al., 2008, p.1). Similarly, Bhattacharya (2017), indicates that “researchers who use narrative inquiry are interested in understanding how people articulate their life experiences in the structure of the story” (p. 27), and further suggests that “narrative inquiry offers a lens, a framework to the study of stories lived” (p. 93). This carefully selected research approach allowed me to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the data gathered and understand via a first-person account

how participants responded to challenges as they navigated through their careers, and ultimately the tools they used to successfully advance to senior level leadership roles. These narratives are accompanied by participant's words of wisdom they can offer to aspiring senior leaders. In addition, I kept a research journal for myself during data collection as this allowed me to reflect on my thoughts and feelings that came up after each interview.

Population Sample

There is a significant need to further promote women into senior leadership ranks, and there are challenges surrounding gender stereotypes that inhibit these promotions. Still, there are also women who have attained such roles and are succeeding in them and my study sought to hear their story. The target population were 13 women in senior level leadership roles that successfully progressed through their careers and can offer career advice to other women, including methods on how to surpass the challenges associated with the "glass ceiling". Senior level leadership roles were defined as those whose job responsibilities include authority over an organization or large unit within, that includes the management of at least five professional staff. Where the senior leader provides budget oversight, strategic leadership and management of administrative, operational or financial functions exercising delegated authority policy and programmatic decisions. Achieving the set goals through managerial staff and in general have multiple levels of professional and supervisory staff (roles defined based on review of several senior level jobs from different organizations). To recruit participants, I used invitation letters that included an introduction of myself, the study goals and the benefits their participation would allow the study (Appendix A). I initially publicized my call for research

participants within my professional circle. Building on these connections, I recruited outside of my circle via snowball sampling for a period of two months. During this time follow-up letters (Appendix B) were sent to non-responders, and the population sample finalized. Invitation letters were sent out to a total of 16 women in senior leadership roles ranging from the areas of government, private sector, non-profit and higher education administration (7 were women of color and 9 were white women). From these, 14 agreed to participate in the study (5 women of color and 9 white women) and interviews took place from October 1, 2021 to December 1, 2021. One of these interviews however, did not fulfill the study needs. As such, by exercising my right as the researcher as indicated in the Consent to Participate Form (Appendix D), this interview was extracted from the study. The final population sample consisted of 13 women in senior leadership roles (5 women of color and 8 white women).

Instrumentation

Using a formal semi-structured interview approach to generate rich and descriptive stories, interviews were conducted with participants as a primary method of data collection. Bhattacharya (2017) suggests that “qualitative interviews are conversations between the interviewer and the interviewee...that are intentional, with specific way of inquiring, with reflexivity...” (p. 126). Ezzy (2010) suggests that interviews are emotional and the emotional framing of the interview plays a major role in forming the content. He states:

Good interviewing, like good romance, engages with precisely the tension between self-confidence and emotional dependence. To ask questions, and to listen to the answers, requires a simultaneous sense of one’s own sense of self as an interviewer independent of the interviewee and an openness to, a dependence on, what the interviewee has to say because without this the relationship is

impossible. Good interviews are not dominated by either the voice of the interviewer or the agendas of the interviewee. Rather, they feel like communion, where the tension between the research question and the experience of the interviewee is explored (p. 164).

To achieve a strong communion with the study participants and capture stories built on the lived experiences of each, it was my intent to be open, to listen carefully and be dependent of what the participants had to say during the interview process. In addition, and as suggested by Fontana and Frey (2005), as the interviewer I will become an advocate and partner in the study, “hoping to be able to use the results to advocate social policies and ameliorate the conditions of the interviewee” (p. 696). In the case of my study, I will use these findings to advocate for women that wish to seek and obtain senior level leadership roles. To further analyze findings, during the interview process I kept a research journal for myself as this allowed me to reflect on my thoughts and feelings that came up after each interview. To capture additional and pertinent data from each participant I collected bios so that I could further explore their education, career trajectory and experience.

Data Collection

I developed open-ended questions which were asked over a 60-90 minute period as my method of inquiry so study participants could express themselves freely and provide detailed stories in relation to the research questions. The series of open-ended questions (Appendix C) utilized in this study were specifically developed to capture information to answer study research questions: *1) What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?, 2) What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level*

leadership role in their field?, and 3) *What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?*

and provide narratives based on the participants lived experiences.

Given the current health challenges COVID-19 has placed among us, the interviews took place over Zoom. However, this web conferencing platform technology allowing the study to have a broader candidate search and offering meeting flexibility while operating in a space of safety for the participants and researcher. In addition, permitting virtual face contact via the video capabilities of this technology and this allowing me, the researcher, an ability to establish rapport with participants in order to generate in-depth information gathering during the interview process (Jennings, 2005). Building strong rapport with participants over Zoom was critical as I, the researcher, was not be able to meet with the participants in their professional work setting. I created a secure Zoom meeting invitation for each participant and provided the secure invitation link via e-mail two weeks prior to the interview. During this time, along with a copy of the consent form, I also provided participants with the interview questions to give them time to review and initiate their thought process. I also collected their bios available in professional social networks such as LinkedIn.

The interviews were recorded using Zoom video and audio recording technology. This method allowed for transcription services via Zoom and fast and reliable access to the recordings. Once all the interviews were conducted, the audio and video recordings were again studied and the transcripts reviewed verbatim. Dialogue transcripts for the interview questions were developed and carefully analyzed by the researcher to ensure full accuracy of data captured.

Data Analysis

In my analysis of the transcripts, I documented my observations, thoughts and feelings during the interview process. I later analyzed the data both of the participant responses to the interview questions (Appendix C) and via the use of researcher reflective memos to capture my personal thoughts. Once the interviews with my study participants were finalized and the data were transcribed, via an inductive analysis approach, described by Bhattacharya (2017), as a process that works up from the data, and “assumes that the researcher is not starting data analysis with any kind of pre-established testable hypothesis about the data” (p. 150). I began the data analysis process by first familiarizing myself with the raw data. I achieved this by: 1) reviewing and reading the transcripts several times, 2) listening to the Zoom recordings and taking note of thoughts and questions that arose for me, 3) reviewing and reflecting on responses to the interview questions set up to respond to my three research questions, and 4) grouping these responses into themes pertinent to each research question. Upon completing this process, I then created smaller chunks of data by pulling key words that emerged. Such key words were “confidence, courage, voice, people networks, gender stereotypes”, etc. This further allowed me to cluster the data into categories that captured recurring themes which were used for further analysis. Breakdown charts were then generated for the sole purpose of keeping themes organized in categories and connected to study participant’s response to the interview questions (Appendix F). During the entire data analysis process, I maintained a journal so that I could reflect on subjectivities, emotions, hunches and questions that arose in association to the study purpose and in addressing the research questions (Bhattacharya, 2017). This process allowed me to further make sense of the

data. Throughout the data analysis the study's research questions framed the process of identifying themes. This was conducted in order to identify the perceptions of the participants regarding what they believe are the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles; the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve these roles and the work/life experiences that contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles. Once I developed and identified the themes that emerged from the participants' narratives, I conducted an analysis of the data and offer an interpretation in Chapter IV.

Upon defense of my dissertation proposal and approval to move forward from my dissertation committee, I filed the proper application with the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco. My research (IRB Protocol #1622) with the project title *Women in Senior Leadership Roles: Career Mobility, Challenges, Success Stories and Need for Future Research* was approved by the IRB Chair under the rules for expedited review on 09/07/2021 (Appendix E). Before starting the interview process for this study, I distributed consent letters to all willing participants and worked with their executive assistants in obtaining their signature of approval. The consent letter (Appendix D) included a description of the research purpose and methodology. At the beginning of each dialogue, I reviewed voluntary nature of the study and emphasized to each participant that their participation was voluntary and they may refuse to participate without penalty. Furthermore, they may skip any questions or tasks that made them uncomfortable and they may discontinue their participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. I informed each study participant that the session was being recorded. That data gathered would be used solely

for the purpose of this study and recordings would be kept secure. In addition, their names would be kept confidential at all times as I presented my findings.

Limitations

Due to the limited number of participants in this study the data did not capture all of the factors that contribute to the career limitations or successes of women in senior leadership roles.

Positionality

I hold over thirty years of experience in the workforce, with the past fifteen years primarily holding leadership roles at a progressive rate. Currently I enjoy a leadership role as Director of Finance and Operations, with significant responsibility in a prestigious university located in Northern California. This responsibility includes the oversight of \$46 million consolidated budget, faculty affairs (approx. 40 regular faculty and 80 lecturers), student services (over 900 students and 50 postdocs), staffing (45 staff members), information technology, risk management, facilities management (143,229 sq ft in space within 11 buildings) and health and safety. In addition, I am responsible for the mentoring and career progression of my direct reports and have been mentoring women on topics of management and career advancement for the past decade.

I hold a Bachelor of Public Administration (BPA) degree and Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree from the University of San Francisco, School of Management. At the time of my graduate studies my thesis focused on gaining a better understanding of how successful managers developed their careers, whom or what helped them accomplish their professional goals, while at the same time growing as leaders and

performing effectively as managers. To support my study I interviewed thirteen women, and two men in leadership roles, this allowing me a further understanding of career development and effective leadership.

I have a passion for career mobility and have witnessed firsthand the challenges women face as they aim to move up the corporate ladder; yet have also witness many women perceive in their career aspirations. Consequently, early in my doctoral studies at the University of San Francisco, School of Education, where I focused on Organization and Leadership, I decided to research the topic further and dedicate my dissertation process to learning more about women in senior leadership roles; their career mobility, the challenges, success stories and need for future research. My lived experiences, both personal and professional grant me an exclusive perspective that aligns with the research findings. Therefore, this allots me a unique opportunity to contribute to the professional growth of other women, while continuing to learn from them.

My experience in leadership and progressive career mobility in spite of challenges allowed me to share a familiarity with study participants. A sisterhood that contributed to a deeper understanding and representation of their narrative. Whom better than a woman passionate about leadership, aspiring for the career advancement of women alike, to pour my energy into researching this topic further and share the lived experiences and insights of study participants. Women already in senior leadership roles whom with their insights are contributing to the catalyst of change. One that will inspire other women to pursue career advancement in spite of roadblocks they will face along the way.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: CHALLENGES, BARRIERS, STRENGTHS AND EXPERIENCES

Introduction

Drawing from over 65 pieces of scholarly work that span across a 100-year period, chapter 2 documented the barrier's many women encounter as they navigate their careers and aim to move up the corporate ladder. Barriers resulting from gender stereotypes ingrained in our society and present in corporate settings. In addition, family responsibilities and what is perceived as a women's lack of vision present as a barrier for women's career progression. Examining first-hand how women in senior leadership roles progressed through their careers, the purpose of this qualitative study was to look at the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field; the strengths and skills utilized and how work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership approach of women in senior leadership roles. By documenting the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles that address challenges and highlight successes as they navigate their careers, I explored how their narratives could inform best practices to strengthen the pipeline and pave a smoother pathway for future female leaders in the workforce. Via the sharing of study participant stories, this chapter offers the personal and professional thoughts of thirteen women currently in senior leadership roles.

Chapter IV Roadmap

Chapter IV starts out with an introduction of my study participants, followed by a participant summary table and a brief description of their senior leader profiles. Upon

introduction of my study participants, I present an overview of their early childhood years. I share how their upbringing and the support they received from their community drove their desire for advancing their education and meet their full potential. I further share how these early childhood experiences have shaped them into the women leaders they are today. I then introduce the structure for the analysis component of the chapter and move to answer my three research questions.

Participant Introduction

The interview component of the study was quite rewarding as it helped answer my research questions and learn from 13 strong, confident, intelligent and well-respected female leaders from the areas of government, private sector, non-profit and higher education administration. Keeping study participants confidentiality at the forefront, for the purpose of identification reporting, participants are introduced in the order of which the interview was transcribed and are given a pseudonym to allow their responses to be more personable. For example, Senior Leader 1, pseudonym “Kate”, was the first interview transcribed.

Senior Leader Profiles

The following provides brief descriptions of each of the study participants and is provided in order to capture their academic accomplishment and the senior leadership roles they hold in their field. More significantly, it’s provided to emphasize that women are indeed occupying senior leadership positions and these 13 study participants are a great example. This in itself adding value to the study as it can be inspirational for women that wish to aspire career advancement. In sum, of the 13 participants, 8 work

within higher education, 3 in the private sector, 1 in non-profit and 1 in government. However, some of the study participants have also changed their fields while practicing in interchangeable senior leadership roles. These roles range from: President, CEO and Senior Vice President in the non-profit and private sector; Provost, Senior Associate Dean, Vice President and Senior Associate Vice Chancellor in higher-ed administration and Vice Mayor for local government. The table below summarizes my study participants and their brief profile descriptions follow.

Participant Summary Table

<i>Senior Leaders</i>	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Education</i>
Senior Leader 1	Kate	Higher-Ed Administration	Senior Associate Dean for Finance & Administration	BA
Senior Leader 2	Courtney	Non-Profit & Higher-Ed Administration	Senior Associate Vice Chancellor	BA, MBA, EdD
Senior Leader 3	Birgit	Non-Profit Administration	President CEO	BA, MS
Senior Leader 4	Olivia	Private Sector	President CEO	BA, MS
Senior Leader 5	Alejandra	Higher-Ed Administration	Assistant Vice President for Business Affairs	BS, MS, MBA
Senior Leader 6	McKenzie	Private Sector	Senior Vice President for Finances	BA, MBA
Senior Leader 7	Victoria	Higher-Ed Administration	Provost	BA, PhD
Senior Leader 8	Perla	Government	Vice Mayor/ Board of Supervisors	BA
Senior Leader 9	Brieanna	Private Sector & Higher-Ed Administration	Vice President of Human Resources	BS
Senior Leader 10	Elva	Higher-Ed Administration	Senior Associate Dean for Finance & Administration	BA, MBA, EdD
Senior Leader 11	Hannah	Higher-Ed Administration	Senior Associate Dean	BA, MBA
Senior Leader 12	Melina	Higher-Ed Administration	Associate Dean for Student Affairs	BS, MPA, EdD
Senior Leader 13	Suellen	Private Sector & Higher-Ed Administration	Vice President of Business Operations	BA, MBA

- Senior Leader 1 “Kate”** is the Senior Associate Dean of Finance and Administration for a school within a private research university located in Northern California. With over thirty years of experience in leadership, in this role she serves as a strategic partner and chief administrative officer overseeing all operational areas, including finances, human resources, information technology, research administration, compliance and facilities. She holds a BA in English.
- Senior Leader 2 “Courtney”** has had an extensive career trajectory in senior leadership roles, leading large and complex administrative units for institutions of higher education and non-profits. She currently holds the role of Senior Associate

Vice Chancellor for a public research university located Northern California where she has oversight for 900 staff and stewards an annual operating budget of over \$200 Million. She holds a BA in Theater Directing/Political Science, an MBA and EdD in Higher Education Administration.

- **Senior Leader 3 “Birgit”** is the President and CEO of a non-profit organization located in Northern California that provides social services to over 4,000 people suffering from addiction or mental health issues, as well as survivors of domestic violence. Her work in this arena earned her a spotlight as “Women of Influence 2016” in the Silicon Valley. She holds a BA in Humanities and Masters of Social Work.
- **Senior Leader 4 “Olivia”** is the President and CEO of a workforce development agency and community building foundation located in the Southern part of the United States. Previous to this, she was the founder and CEO of a diversity, equity and inclusion consulting firm that at its peak advised some of the world’s largest brands and Fortune 500 CEOs on why diversity, inclusion and gender equity should be prioritized and generated over \$20 Million in revenue. She is also an established author, is recognized internationally, was named to Forbes Top Texan Women in Business and received the Working Woman’s Entrepreneurial Award, among several others distinguished awards. She holds a BA in Education and MS in Psychology.
- **Senior Leader 5 “Alejandra”** has had an impressive career trajectory, starting as a financial analyst and in the span of thirteen years moving into the role of Assistant Vice President for Business Affairs and Administration, in a private

research university located in Northern California. In this role she has management and leadership responsibility for finance and budget, human resources and facilities. She holds a BS in Accounting, MS in Financial Planning and an MBA.

- **Senior Leader 6 “McKenzie”** is the Senior Vice President of Finances, for an international corporation that specializes in overnight delivery of high-priority packages, documents, and heavy freight. She started her career over thirty years ago as a sales executive; learning how to recognize opportunity, she steadily moved up the ranks. She holds a BA in Psychology and an MBA.
- **Senior Leader 7 “Victoria”** is well known for her leadership approach and ability to foster collaboration. Leading with compassion has made this senior leader stand out and gain the loyalty of others. She has had an extensive career trajectory in higher education both as a practitioner and university administrator. She has held senior leadership roles as Director, Dean and Provost, with many of these as the first women to hold these roles. Under her realm, women have been promoted to leadership positions once only obtained by men. She holds a BA in Math and Physics and Ph.D. in Atomic Physics.
- **Senior Leader 8 “Perla”** started her career as Vice Mayor of a Northern California City. She is now on their Board of Supervisors, and soon running for Mayor of this very town. In 2016 she was the primary architect of a groundbreaking \$950-million measure that provided a housing bond to help end homelessness in her county. She is known for her passion and extensive investment in elevating women and in 2021 she was presented with the Woman of

the Year Award by an organization that focuses on the advancement of women in transportation. She holds a BA in Political Science.

- **Senior Leader 9 “Brianna”** has had an extensive career trajectory in senior leadership roles starting first in finances and moving her way to her true passion in human resources. In the human resources field, she’s held Vice President roles in the private sector and higher education. She has made extensive contributions to comprehensive leadership and development programs that have contributed to the career advancement of women and men alike. She holds a BS in Business Administration and Finances.
- **Senior Leader 10 “Elva”** is highly respected for her strong leadership voice and passion for diversity. She serves in a role as Senior Associate Vice Provost and Senior Adviser to the Provost on equity and inclusion for a private research university located in Northern California. In this role she is the steward for a \$3 billion asset portfolio and directs an 800+ talented team. She holds a BA in Home Economics, an MBA and EdD in Educational Leadership.
- **Senior Leader 11 “Hannah”** is described as a standout leader who believes you can change the world simply by doing your job. She is the Senior Associate Dean for Finance and Administration for a large school within a private research university located in Northern California. In this role she is responsible for the school’s financial, administrative, and information technology functions. She has financial oversight for a \$2.0 billion budget, and sets financial and administrative policy for the school’s 27 academic departments and 8 interdisciplinary institutes and centers. She holds a BA in Economics and an MBA.

- **Senior Leader 12 “Melina”** is the Associate Dean in Student Affairs at a private research university in Northern California. In her many roles she has contributed to leadership development with a focus on women’s career advancement. She has positively impacted the careers of many and continues to do so via mentorship programs she has established. She holds a BS in Business Administration/Marketing, MPA in Organizational Development and an EdD in International & Multicultural Education.
- **Senior Leader 13 “Suellen”** has served in senior leadership roles such as Associate Dean for Administration and Finances and Vice President of Business Operations, in higher education and medicine. She has taken her passion for leadership to a larger extent and is currently an Executive and Leadership Coach, running her own coaching firm. She holds a BA in Communication and an MBA in Strategic Leadership.

Findings

De Niña a Mujer Leader: The Early Years

An examination of the study participant’s upbringing confirmed that the support they received from their family, community and focus on education, contributed to the women leaders they are today. Furthermore, for 76% of the study participants, mentorship opportunities either formal or informal, helped them navigate their careers and recognize opportunities. Analysis of interview transcripts also showed that in addition to these support systems, the majority of the study participants were quite competitive when they were growing up and had an “I’ll show you” attitude when they were told they could not accomplish, or “pushed themselves” to achieve even if it made

them feel uncomfortable. However, in spite of their rebellious and progressive nature, this is not to say that they did not encounter multiple challenges as they entered the workforce and navigated their careers. Challenges surrounding the fact they were aiming to establish themselves, their careers and leadership approach as women.

The Early Years: Family & Community Support

Family and community support was an important factor for the study participants as they were growing up and a major contributor to the women leaders they are today. While all coming from diverse backgrounds and raised in different socioeconomic settings, this intersectionality in itself imposing different challenges for each participant and which must be recognized. However one thing was certain: the deep-rooted values they inherited from their families, cultures and communities contributed to their voices, motivations and eagerness to thrive. In the majority of the cases participants shared stories of how their parents—either the mother, father, or both—played a significant role in encouraging them to meet their full potential. The support for each study participant took form in different shapes. Some shared how their parents were strong role models, this being inspirational in itself; others were grateful for the strict direction their parents provided; while several appreciated the freedom their parents gave them to choose. These varied forms of support enabled these then young girls to grow into the transformational leaders they are today. Findings for this section of the study are supported by research conducted for the literature review (participant stories captured via Appendix G: *The Early Years, Her Story*). To recap, research indicates that the learning and development of young girls starts at a very young age. Values from culture and family are pre-conditioning girls to be the confident women they are today. Or to the very contrary, to

lack the confidence needed for important decision making. As a result, affecting women's career choices and their successful career path (Rimm, 1999). Leaning on Rimm's research, the goal of capturing study participants early years' experience, was to tie it back to key aspects of their career aspirations and leadership approach. This approach will serve to further utilize these findings and promote the early development of future female leaders.

“Tell her every day she is smart and capable and lift her up...Don't underestimate the power of day-to-day motivation and inspiration in a girl's life.”

~Michelle Obama~

Education

Education also played a major role for the study participants as they all excelled academically from an early age. While they grew up in different socio-economic households and not all parents had an advanced education, education was very important and in the majority of the cases, it was highly emphasized when they were growing up. All of the women interviewed had at least a bachelor's degree and 11 out of the 13 had graduate-level degrees. As highlighted in the background and study need portion of this dissertation, research suggests that education is a contributing factor to the advancement of women and their development as leaders (Rimm, 1999; Salas-Lopez, et al., 2011), and per the [National Center for Educational Statistics](#) women attaining master's degrees are at 58.4% and doctorate degrees at 52.7%. This represents approximately three million more women currently enrolled in postsecondary education in comparison to men (Carnevale, et al., 2018). Therefore, to shape the future of our daughters setting high educational

expectations is a contributing factor to their professional success. This too was expressed by my study participants during the interview process and emphasized in their stories (Appendix H: *Education, Her Story*).

“You have what it takes to be a victorious, independent, fearless woman.”

~Tyra Banks~

Chapter IV Analysis Structure

Research questions were used to structure the analysis of the interview data. From the analysis of the interview data recurring themes arose for each research question. These themes were placed into categories that present the findings to the research question. Findings for each theme include an analysis of the theme, backed up by literature review when available, followed by study participant narratives and summary of findings.

Research Question Findings

In answering my three research questions: 1) *What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?*, 2) *What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?*, and 3) *What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?*, I use a set of interview questions that guided the process and allowed me to highlight these challenges and how study participants responded to them as they moved up the corporate ladder. I further feature the elements that influence women’s career success, with each of my study participants expanding on their own definition of success. Findings presented in

this chapter are supported by literature review and study participant responses are discussed correspondingly to the themes that emerged via the interview process.

Research Question 1

The first research question this study sought to answer was, *What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?* To find the answer, the following interview questions were particularly meaningful:

- a) In order to achieve senior level leadership roles in your field, what are some of the challenges and barriers that women need to overcome?
- b) What were the challenges and barriers that were particularly significant for you?
- c) What can women who aspire to attain senior leadership roles in their field do to overcome these challenges and barriers?

Study participant responses were organized in two categories. These are: 1) *challenges and barriers overcome women in senior leadership roles* and 2) *study participant advice on how aspiring women can overcome these challenges and barriers*. Each category captures recurring themes that would help address the research question, followed by quotes from study participants aligned to each theme and a brief discussion.

Challenges and Barriers Overcome

Women represent 57.1% of the US working population ([US Department of Labor](#)). From this working population, 40% of women hold positions in managerial or professional roles ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)). While women represent over half of the working population and have demonstrated success in management and professional positions, they continue to face barriers in attaining senior level leadership roles across multiple fields ([Fortune](#), 2019; [Pew Research Center](#), 2018; Seo, et al, 2017; Schwanke,

2013; Johns, 2013). In exploring the challenges and barriers women must overcome in order to attain senior leadership roles in their field the insights provided by my study participants revealed four themes. These are: 1) *lack of confidence*, 2) *family responsibilities*, 3) *building a voice* and 3) *gender stereotypes*. From this, 61% of the participants viewed lack of confidence as a major barrier. Followed by gender stereotypes at 54%, building a voice at 38% and family responsibilities at 30%.

Confidence

Consistent with my literature review research findings (Ibarra, et al., 2013; Ely and Kolb, 2013; Sherman, 2013; Stevenson and Orr, 2017; Wardell, 2020), 61% of my study participants viewed having a lack of confidence as a major barrier for women's career progression and further suggest it's a barrier that many women unconsciously place on themselves. Study participants placed this as a more alarming barrier in comparison to the persistent gender stereotypes women face as they aim to move up the corporate ladder. The perception of my study participants is that women are much more questioning of their own abilities and suffer from more self-doubt in comparison to men. In addition, aligned with Sherman (2013) and Wardell (2020) position on impostor syndrome, study participants likewise suggested that many times women suffer from the impostor syndrome. This crippling thought process and lack of confidence consequently holding many women back from career progression as they may doubt themselves and their leadership capabilities. As a result, many women may not be pursuing career mobility opportunities they are qualified to hold. This resulting in additional repercussions as these very women may not be viewed as viable candidates by decision makers. Given women already have many structural and societal barriers limiting their

access to senior leadership roles, it's imperative to align this thought process and curtail limiting beliefs. Olivia indicated "The biggest barrier to overcome is the courage, the opportunity, self-confidence." Similarly, Victoria proposed that "women are much more questioning of their own ability than they should be and sometimes they should just go for it". Suellen suggested that women suffer from more self-doubt than men. This as a result can undermine their credibility regardless of having the skills to back it up. She stated:

You know, there's something about credibility, right, and I think it weighs more on women than men. And so, credibility, there are a lot of different requirements within whatever or wherever you're going. Whether you look the part...right, whether you're dressed professionally, you show up, whether you have the degrees, or the skills or whatever, and the confidence you can do this...and I think women suffer from more self-doubt than men. And I don't know why that is, and perhaps you can tell me. And so, if they're doubting their own credibility, it undermines them.

Suellen brought up a key point about credibility. It has been my experience that in order to advance in one's career and succeed as a leader, you have to be viewed as credible by others. If others don't view the leader, or a potential leader as trustworthy, the leadership role will fail or cease to exist for the aspiring individual. However, credibility starts within. How can others view any leader as credible if the leader does not view this within? Viewing themselves as credible can be especially difficult for aspiring women that suffer from self-doubt. Perhaps self-doubt is associated to the impostor syndrome highlighted by Elva. She stated: "Many times, we have you know, what is called the impostor syndrome where we doubt ourselves, we doubt our capabilities, even though we have more than enough experience and education...it's cultural, sometimes when we're taught that women should be in their place."

Viewing it as a barrier in itself, Courtney did not know what the barriers were until she was pretty late in her career. However, upon discovering this, she learned that women tend to be less confident than men. She stated:

I will tell you I don't think I knew what the barriers were until I was 50... Yeah, so you you're studying this topic right, and I never once picked up a book about women in leadership, I never once... I can tell you what some of those barriers are now that I'm aware... In general, women don't have much confidence and gut as our male counterparts right. So, I grew up very confident, I was a confident athlete, I was a confident theatre performer, I'm a very confident person, so I thought that confidence was not an issue for me and I didn't know it was a real barrier for women, but there is so much evidence out there that we are less confident... When women look at the next step, they say wow I'm missing 30%, so they don't apply. A man reads it and goes oh, I'm missing a little bit, and I can learn it really quickly.

Referring to similar studies, Suellen equally made this observation. She stated:

There're studies right, that show that women won't apply for a job unless she meets like 90% of the criteria... A challenge for me is you know, I have the MBA, I have the financial background... but where my true strengths lie is building teams, building culture, and it's the softer skills and those aren't always appreciated as much in our society... I think women, it would behoove us to reflect on what we bring. Rather than focus on what we don't have and what we consider our deficits and trying to build those up. I don't think men look at it the same way. They look at what they bring. Women see the gaps.

This lack of confidence where women don't believe they hold all the skills required for the leadership role as indicated by both Courtney and Suellen can be perhaps connected to "think manager-think male" stereotype from the 1970's which fosters bias against women in managerial placement, promotions etc. (Schein 2001). Similarly, Eagly and Sczesny (2009) highlighted that "traditional stereotypes about leaders are predominantly masculine in their emphasis on agentic qualities" (p. 25). Lublin (2016) also suggests that stereotypes persist about women's leadership abilities.

Sharing a slightly different approach Perla believes this lack of confidence may be connected to women's concerns about what other people think about them. As a result of these concerns women get in their own way of accomplishing their goals. She elaborated as follows:

Women think a lot about, an awful lot about how people think about us...because of that, I think barrier number one is something we do to ourselves...we don't even decide whether or not we're going to get up into the race...even if we work out every day, there's a race coming up... 'I don't even run fast enough, oh there will be too many people, I don't have the right shoes, I run like a girl' and because of that I can't imagine how many brilliant women there are in the world that aren't scientist, aren't doctors, aren't lawyers, aren't politicians, aren't CEOs, because at some level they've taken on the oppression of the world and accepted it. So, the first thing I think is very number one, get out of your own way. Barrier number two is that because we care about how people feel about us, we are inclined to move in ways that don't disrupt the other... We don't disrupt other people that we don't disrupt systems and in some ways, that is a sign of respect...but at some point, you have to have enough confidence to say the reason I'm here is that I do think things should be different. I do have values that may be in conflict with my colleagues, or potential colleagues, I do have a different voice, and think there is a validity to that voice.

Similar to the argument I make about deep rooted structural and societal gender stereotypes that affect women's confidence and their ability to take on higher roles unless they feel they meet all the criteria's, I pose that "women getting in their own way of accomplishing their goals" is too connected to deep rooted beliefs on what women can accomplish. Seo, et al., (2017) propose that there is an unequal social status among genders where women are granted lower status than men and this producing expectations on gender differences. I argue that stemming from this social expectation on gender differences "women do think an awful lot about what people think about us" as Perla indicated. This fear of criticism, which many times does come with repercussions if "women don't act womanly" or within the societal expectation of their role, is perhaps

leading to a domino effect where women get in their own way of accomplishing their goals.

Having a slightly different perspective, Melina disclosed that the barriers she encountered arose from the lack of confidence from other women and not her own. This experience impacting her career advancement as these very women tried to “dissuade” her from pursuing leadership roles. She stated:

You know, this is going to sound really crazy, but I think one of the biggest challenges that I have seen in advancement for leadership positions are other women. I think some of my biggest champions have been women, but they have also been men...On the flip side I've had women managers who have not been as supportive or who have tried to talk me down or dissuade me from going after positions...So I think some of the challenges when women of color particularly get these higher ranks, they get a little possessive and they may get intimidated and they don't want anyone else playing in their field or going for positions.

Melina's identification of women of color getting possessive or intimidated when they reach higher lever positions while veiled, may be connected to the impostor syndrome Elva, Wardell (2020) and Sherman (2013) touch upon. In particular, for women of color Wardell (2020) suggests that the imposter syndrome may be more exacerbated as they “receive societal messages of not belonging or not being good enough” (p. 103). This is grave as the impostor syndrome can dismay women's career aspirations at multiple levels. For one, women suffering from impostor syndrome may not have the confidence needed to pursue career progression as they may not feel they hold the skills to do so. Women already in senior leadership roles suffering from impostor syndrome while not visible, would also suffer from a lack confidence. This lack of confidence pushing them to hold on to their accomplishments more tightly while inadvertently lacking the ability to support the accomplishments of others. This thought process mainly connected to a

scarcity mindset and the fear of losing what they worked so hard to achieve. This unconscious yet jeopardizing thought process, having a negative effect on aspiring women needing the support of other women already in senior leadership roles in order to move up the ranks. Consequently, creating an ongoing domino effect that keeps aspiring women from career progression and the attainment of senior leadership roles.

Addressing the self-doubt that my study participants touch upon can be accomplished, as suggested by Brianna. From what she described as a woman's "own frame of reference" and based on "her own perspective", she indicated that women can get to high levels of leadership if they overcome self-doubt and start from a point of confidence. She stated:

I think it's evolved a little bit, although I think it hasn't evolved enough. Sometime as a woman you probably have your own frame of reference on that. So, I think first, from my own perspective may not be applicable to everybody, is to know yourself and be able to overcome your own self-doubts, and even before overcoming your own self-doubts, be sure of what it is that you really would like to do...I think you can still get to very high levels of leadership, if you really start from a point of confidence. Like who am I, what do I have to offer, what are the things I'm interested in learning and developing and having that growth mindset and then stepping into it.

I concur with Brianna and believe that irrespective of barriers that may be present, women need to continue working from their own perspective on overcoming self-doubt. This as a result will suppress the impostor syndrome and help align confidence to factual leadership strengths that many women hold. At the immediate however, this will not take away from the fact that gender stereotypes present in our society are contributing to women's lack of confidence and present as a barrier for women's career progression. To recap, the unequal social status among genders where women are granted lower status than men is producing expectations on gender differences (Seo, et al., 2017). The "think

manager-think male” stereotype from the 1970’s which fosters bias against women in managerial placement, promotions etc. (Schein 2001), is still very much present in our society (Powell, 2011). In addition, persisting stereotypes about women’s leadership abilities (Lublin, 2016) and established stereotypes about leaders which continue to emphasize agentic qualities known to be male dominant (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009), while subtle, continue to be present today. As I analyzed my study participant responses, I was surprised that gender stereotypes were not highlighted as an overarching theme. As such, I make the argument that resulting from these gendered stereotypes ingrained in our culture that give women a lower social status than men and don’t view women as leadership material, are contributing to women’s lack of confidence. In this case women not believing they have all the key attributes for senior leadership roles and these stereotypes being rooted so deep within our society that women themselves may “think manager-think male”.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes structurally ingrained in our culture play a significant role in the challenges women encounter as they aim to access and attain senior leadership roles as suggested by my literature review findings (Schein, 2001; Fels, 2004; Singh and Terjesen, 2008; Eagly and Sczesny, 2009; McEldowney, et al., 2009; Powell, 2011; Ryan, et al., 2011; Johns, 2013; Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013; Hopkins and O’Neil, 2015; Northouse, 2016; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017; Kubu, 2017; Carnevale, et al., 2018; Aydin, 2020; Offerman and Foley, 2020). Consistent with these findings, 54% of my study participants highlighted gender stereotypes as an overall barrier for women and present as a barrier in their career progression. In some cases, gender stereotypes starting

in their own homes and this resulting in women halting their career in order to keep peace in the household. Yet, with the majority of my study participants experiencing gender stereotypes in the workforce as they navigated their careers and executed their leadership roles.

While most of the study participant parents played a huge role in shaping these then young girls into the women leaders they are today, this is not to say that gender stereotypes weren't present in some early childhood homes. Though she did not highlight it as a barrier to career advancement, it's important to emphasize her story as an example of how gender stereotypes get structurally ingrained in our culture via early childhood experiences. McKenzie shared that from the age of 12 all she ever dreamed about was going to Stanford University and worked very hard to get there "I saw Stanford on TV when I was 12 years old and it became an obsession", she excitedly shared. When she did get in, and disproving of her accomplishment, her father sat her down and said, "I'm concerned you're going to be the most well-educated housewife." Although this was quite upsetting to her to the point she developed an ulcer, her father's disapproval fortunately had the opposite effect on her. McKenzie went off to show him wrong and leaving her childhood home in the southern part of the US, attended Stanford University for her undergraduate experience. Facing a similar situation growing up, Birgit shared that while she was encouraged in a lot of ways, her parents were "unknowingly highly sexist". She stated:

So, it was interesting, in a lot of ways we were encouraged. But I'm old enough now to know that my folks were unknowingly highly sexist. They didn't think about it, but it was the world that they grew up in, and so the expectations for my brothers versus myself were quite different...and so, in a lot of ways I was really encouraged, in other ways...it was like doing the dishes while my brothers were

sitting... We're an Irish family, so gender roles were kind of forced. Even though my mother was highly frustrated by the gender roles.

Progressing in her career to be the first female CEO for the organization her role currently serves, Birgit did not allow the gender stereotypes that were present in her early childhood home reflect in her professional life. However, she does recognize that gender stereotypes are present in her field. As she reflects on the percentage of women that hold senior leadership roles in social services, she shares that 85% of the people employed in the field are women, yet only 15% of the agencies are led by women. She believes this phenomenon is occurring because there are not enough women at the top. This resulting in a domino effect that does not allow women access to senior leadership positions. She stated:

I think one of the barriers to women getting leadership roles in human services broadly, is getting one woman at the top. Because when I look around at my fellow agencies, whatever the top person is, you tend to find that gender...and if the CEO is a man, there tend to be a lot of men in senior leader positions.

Having this imbalance of more men in senior leadership positions vs. and equal number of women, does not allow women to learn from women leaders. This yet again having the effect of taking us back to "think manager- think male" phenomenon and keeping us in the belief that only the agentic leadership qualities, which are masculine in nature are more suited for senior leadership roles. Since initiating this study, three of the senior leaders interviewed (*Kate, Courtney and Hannah*) have either retired or moved on to other roles. Given the "think manager-think male" phenomenon is predominant, it is perhaps not a coincidence that men have been hired to replace two of these senior leaders. This being irrespective of the fact that qualified women pursued these senior leadership roles, yet were not taken into serious consideration. I do however need to highlight that

one of the study participant (*Courtney*) moved on to a significant promotional opportunity.

Married and raising children at a very young age, Alejandra experienced gender stereotypes in her own home when her then husband continuously expressed discouragement that she earned more money than him. Wanting to keep harmony in her home she thought, “this is going to be my glass ceiling, this is as good as it’s going to get”. At that time, this resulting in her not being able to meet her full professional potential and pursuing higher education and career advancement until after she divorced him. Yet, even after taking these steps to advance her career, she continued to experience gender stereotypes in the workplace and believes “women work 50 times harder” just to prove themselves. She thinks this may be connected to the expectations women have on themselves and this contributing to “our own burnout”. She stated:

I think another challenge is breaking the stereotypes. From people at work I often still see this now, where people in similar roles, one’s a male and one’s a female and the female works 50 times harder...I feel like there’s a constant having to prove yourself and that stereotype of a female has many more household responsibilities, and so they can’t be fully dedicated to work...I think females, the expectations we have on ourselves are much higher than the expectations that others expect from us that it becomes a challenge because we contribute to our own burnout.

While I do concur with Alejandra, that women can contribute to “our own burnout”, there are studies that suggest that women with families do 2/3 of the household work and hold major responsibilities for childcare and family needs (Babcock and Laschever, 2009; Carnevale et al., 2018). This became more so evident during the COVID pandemic where women found themselves caring for children, homeschooling them, while trying to manage their jobs. Therefore, even if women are placing these expectations on

themselves, it is critical to break the gender stereotypes and social expectations that keep women working longer hours, both at home and work (hooks, 2000) as this too is contributing to women's burnout. If we don't do so, women will continue to be socially condoned if they don't first meet family expectations (Fells, 2004) and "think a lot about, an awful lot about how people think about us" as Perla indicated. This combined thought process having an additional effect for it is feeding the glass ceiling phenomenon already primarily affecting women.

Having to "laugh it off" at times, Suellen shared what she learned early in her career was a double standard for women. "If a man is pleasant in his request in the work environment, he's so nice...and if a woman doesn't, she's a bitch". As such, women are not only having to be competent in their work, but they also equally have to be pleasant to be valued as a leader. Yet, when they are pleasant, women are also criticized for being too collaborative as they are not seen as decisive. Elaborating on this frustration, Suellen stated:

So, I'll share some frustration and something I learned early on as a department manager. I shared an assistant with the department chair (*a man*), and she was a very capable woman. Older than me, smart and respected me. And yet if the department chair asked her to do something she'd do it, and if I asked her to do something she'd asked why. What I have learned and observed, if a man is pleasant in his request in the work environment, he's so nice...and if a woman doesn't she's a bitch...right, and so it's such a double standard that women have to be kind and competent...I've been criticized in the past for being too collaborative right, because then you're not seen as decisive enough and so there's these different messages that we receive...Growing up we're told to be polite and make things easier for others right, and be the unifier...We play nicely with others, we play house...and men don't have that same requirement, they just have to be competent so women have to become even more competent and be nice as well.

This is a problem that many women encounter in the workforce, not only in their leadership roles, but as they aspire to attain them. If women speak as much as men in a work setting, or compete for a high-level role, their femininity comes into attack. They are then viewed as unattractive, promiscuous or even seductive (Fells, 2004). While fearing being viewed as “unattractive, promiscuous or even seductive” can be interpreted as superficial by critics, in the workplace it is an oppressive approach closely aligned to harassment. A tactic that keeps many women silent, unable to express their true selves and showcase their talents and contributions. Another form of criticism comes into play for women who have attained senior leadership roles. In this scenario it’s difficult for women already in senior leadership roles to be authentic, ambitious and even self-confident in their authority as they may be criticized for being too agentic and not holding communal qualities. If they exercise communal qualities, they are then criticized for not holding agentic qualities (Hopkins & Oneil; 2015; Aydin, 2020). These social expectations making it quite challenging for women to shape their leadership identity.

Experiencing gender stereotypes from a different angle, in following her father’s advice, Victoria ensured she established herself first in her discipline as a scientist before taking on a leadership role. This was imperative for when she took on her first major leadership role as a research director for a national laboratory where she was viewed as being a good administrator because perhaps, she was not good with the science. She shared:

All the little hairs on the back of my neck stood up because I could tell that the very senior people who now I controlled their budget and strategic direction were all sort of saying to themselves ‘well she’s doing that because she’s a really good administrator, but we’re the real science here’. And so...as I moved into an administrative role the very first major decision was that I was very conscious that

I make it absolutely clear to people I could go toe to toe with them on the science...It was really, really important because people will not take you seriously if they can conveniently put you in a little box 'oh she's an administrator, she's a manager'...I'm every good a scientist as I'm a manager.

This is essential to highlight as Victoria's experience is similar to the gender stereotype Suellen encountered (*agentic vs. communal qualities in women's leadership approach*).

In this case it was not Victoria's leadership style that was questioned. It was her scientific discipline that was questioned because she simultaneously held a leadership role. What gender stereotypes tell us is if it were a man in the role, his capacities would not have been questioned and he'd be viewed great at both roles, and doing an honorable service. Yet, since it was a woman, she was scrutinized and her capabilities questioned.

Expressing that some of her counterparts being men, did not hold the advanced degrees she holds (*BA, MBA, EdD*), and in some cases only holding a two-year degree, they still hold comparable senior leadership roles. As such, Courtney suggested that women must have the certifications, degrees and experience in order to progress through their careers. She stated:

I mean, we can't take any shortcuts. Look at the two of us, highly educated...I have noticed that there are men who don't need to go as far on their education...At work I have noticed that women tend to be more educated than their male counterparts and they have had to be...I just think we need everything in our back pocket. Your certifications, your degrees, your experience, we need it. No shortcuts...some of the men that I work with, I have a couple who don't even have an AA degree, but they are peers to me. I hope that generation, I hope it's over. Because I think some of it is generational.

This is a reality for many aspiring women as confirmed via my literature review. To recap literature review findings: women represent 57% of college students seeking undergraduate degrees, 58.4% attaining master's degrees and 52.7% doctorate degrees.

This represents approximately 3 million more women currently enrolled in postsecondary education in comparison to men (Carnevale, et al., 2018; [Pew Research Center](#); [National Center for Educational Statistics](#)). Yet, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles (Bass, et al., 1994; Oakley, 2000; McEldowney, et al., 2009; Johns, 2013; Schwanke, 2013; Seo, et al., 2017). This underrepresentation connected to persistent gender stereotypes present in our society and many times starting in one's home. Alike Courtney, I too hope this is generational. I hope we can continue to elevate women so that the equivalent number of women that are attaining masters and doctorate degrees are also attaining senior leadership roles. Where there is equitable representation of women among multiple fields and it's not crucial for women to have everything in their back pocket but the training needed to get them where they want to go in their professional career.

Encountering first generation gender stereotypes early in her career, Kate shared that a major barrier she encountered when she was coming up the ranks was that "most men looked at females as clerical workers or secretaries". In addition, because of the fact that she was a very young female in a leadership role and the men did not have "much respect for staff" she felt discounted as a leader. She stated:

Sadly, in a staff role, at an elite institution...especially when I was coming up through the ranks, most men looked at females as a clerical worker or secretary. So basically, you're not the Associate Dean, you must be the Dean's admin...So I got a lot of that, and I think it's pretty typical...I mean when I took the job, I was quite young...so...just the discounting.

Women in leadership, even if these are senior leaders, also tend to be discounted when they express ideas or opinions. I myself have been in the position where I've expressed ideas which have been discounted. Yet if a male counterpart expressed that same idea

within the same conversation, the idea is then glorified; a first-hand observation I have made. In elaborating back to the interview I had with Victoria, she shared an encounter she had with a male colleague, which was also a good friend of hers. In this encounter she offered to serve him coffee as he was running late for a meeting they were both attending. He urged her to never to put herself in a position where she is serving coffee, especially to her male counterparts. I elaborate on this story as it touches upon what Kate described: that women, even those in senior leadership roles, were looked as a being a “clerical worker or secretary” when she was coming up the ranks. This gender stereotype is amplified if women are serving coffee to their male counterparts. Whilst the act of serving coffee in itself is meaningless, for women in the workforce it can have repercussion as first-generation gender stereotypes still linger. This innocent act unconsciously viewing women as clerical workers and not senior leaders. As a result, creating barriers for aspiring women in pursuit of their career goals. For those women that have reached their career aspirations, dismissed of their accomplishments.

Study participant shared different, yet very similar personal experiences on how gender stereotypes affect women in the workplace. Experiences that question their authority, scrutinize their capabilities, dismiss their accomplishments, require of women higher levels of experience and academic accomplishments in comparison to men, and ultimately contribute to women’s overall burnout. Experiences that can easily silence a woman’s voices. Yet these are the very voices that are needed to fight against gender stereotypes and give women a strong presence in the workplace. A must have attribute as aspiring women pursue senior leadership roles.

“I didn’t learn to be quiet when I had an option.

The reason they knew who I was is because I told them.”

~Ursula Burns~

Voice

There are other subtle barriers perhaps connected to lack of confidence and gender stereotypes that women encounter as they navigate their careers. The power of having a voice and exercising it is an essential skill for any leader. Dr. Mary J. Wardell (2020) advises women to be ready to step into their power. When the time is right to use their voice and tell the truth as this is the responsibility of true leadership. Similarly, 38% of my study participants view the power of building one’s voice, making themselves visible and heard as crucial in leadership and career progression. Fortunately to have a very powerful voice, Victoria provides similar advice as she ensures to exercise her voice and not let others dwindle it. She indicated “I inherited from my father, a really powerful wild voice and so there’s this classic thing of people who talk over women and no one can talk over me if I don’t want them to talk over me and I would use that, I would just use it.” Similarly, to using their voice and being heard, overcoming being ignored was crucial for Hannah. She indicated “One of the things they (*women*) need to overcome is being ignored or not being seen. You know women in a group are usually invisible...and I see this myself, they’re not self-promoting and they’re not visible.”

Nonetheless, while it is crucial to build one’s voice, to use it and as a result be seen, this can be challenging for many female leaders, especially when they are starting out in their careers. This was the case for Birgit when she first started her role as CEO. “I think the biggest challenges that I faced were internal...When I was first offered this

position and was trying to figure out if I could do it or not...I think one of the biggest challenges that I had was growing into having a voice and to be able to use it effectively”, she indicated.

Nevertheless, even after developing a voice and using it effectively, exercising it in itself can be a challenge for many women as it can be viewed as being forceful or a complainer. Many times, this silencing even the most powerful of voices that have a right to be heard and wisdom to contribute. Although her mother taught her and her sisters the importance of having a voice and standing strong with it, Elva resonates with this and expressed that there are challenges associated with having a voice, specifically for women of color. However, she has not let those challenges silence her. She shared:

And so, she (*her mother*) then taught myself, along with my three sisters, you know, how to stand up for ourselves. How to have a voice, how to value and how to make sure nobody took our voice away...and that is a challenge, always. So, because when you have a voice, then in some instances you are not respected for that voice, because people will give you labels like ‘she’s an angry black woman’, or call you names that begin with the alphabet letter ‘B’. And so, I guess when you are a woman of color, you’re supposed to just get along.

Having a voice, one that is heard, valued and respected is crucial to cultivate in any leadership role and can be the most powerful tool in a woman’s leadership toolbox. One’s voice can be used to make yourself visible as you navigate your career and in the way you lead your team or influence others. There is a saying that ‘silence can’t be heard’ and with silence opportunities can get lost. Therefore, a significant barrier for women wanting to attain senior leadership roles and then steer them, is not having or owning their voice. This is closely aligned to the importance of constructing a leadership identity (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013; Kapasi, Sang & Sitko, 2016; Stevenson & Orr, 2017). Yet, reflecting back on gender stereotypes, a strong voice can also place a double standard on women as they

can be viewed as angry, loud or a “B” if their voice gets too uncomfortable for others as Elva highlighted. Perhaps this being the reason many women stay silent and don’t raise their hands for promotions (Lublin, 2016) or sharing of ideas. Yet, not exercising a voice leads to the perception that women in leadership lack vision (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2019) and ambition. This resulting in a negative domino effect to women’s career progression and leadership contributions.

Family Responsibilities

Alike to my literature review research findings, which indicates that 51% of working women with children under the age of 18 found it hard to advance in their career due to family responsibilities (Hein & Cassirer, 2010; Schwanke, 2013; 2013 [Pew Research Center](#); Lublin, 2016; Oschenfeld, 2017; Seo, et al., 2017), 30% of my study participants highlighted this as a natural barrier for professional women. Sharing that she had to attend a business trip just one week after giving birth to her son “with the breast pump and the whole thing”, Courtney empathized with this challenge. She indicated, “We have some of the normal barriers which is raising children right. There is no replacement for a mother...I have an amazing husband who has been an amazing father, but you know they can’t give birth, they can’t nurse.” Similarly, Victoria indicated, “I grew up in a very warm supportive family and family was very important to me, and so I wanted to be able to balance family and career. So, you know my husband and I have three kids, so I think that’s a challenge for any professional woman no matter how supportive the spouse is.”

For women with families that too want to grow in their careers and contribute outside of their home, there is no option but to juggle between work and home. Equally

demanding tasks to say the least! Yet, if not managed, women run the risk of keeping their careers stale. On the other spectrum, not having the option of having a family as they would have to put family on hold in order to manage their careers. Both having a career and a family being a woman's right! McKenzie expressed how difficult it is to juggle both responsibilities. Yet necessary for women's career growth and representation of other women. At the highlight of her career, where she was representing the voices of over 1,300 people working in the US, Canada and Latin America and 65% of these being female front-line workers, McKenzie was traveling extensively while raising a family. She shared, "It was an exhausting period of time, my kids were early teenagers, and I was traveling three days a week, I was gone more than I was home...but I loved it...I needed to be there so I can learn about what those 65% of that frontline workforce did every day, so that I could be their voice in Memphis."

While the majority of study participants expressed that they had a supportive environment that allowed them to juggle between home and their careers, the guilt of not being with their family always lingered behind. Wanting to have a family from a young age, Alejandra highlights guilt as a key barrier to career advancement and talks about it extensively. She shared:

From my experience, I think one of them is guilt. The guilt between work-life balance...Since I moved to the Bay Area it's a little different than growing up in Salinas where there was a clear expectation. You get married young, you have children, you work and it was kind of an expected thing. The expectation there was you have children young...Coming up here (*the Bay Area*) I realized I was a young parent and when I would pick up my kids from school and do the drop offs, the other parents were my mom's age, not my age. And I thought, wow that's even more challenging if you're a female trying to have your career and you've been raised with the expectation that you need to put your family on hold so that you can build your career in order for you not to be missing out on key opportunities. That would have been very challenging for me because I knew,

since I was little that I wanted to have a family. My family was very important to me and I knew that was going to happen. And so, for me, I think as a female if you're going to be in a leadership role, I mean that very strategic decision to either sacrifice some for the time with your family for your career if you're going to have a family young. To put off having your family in order for you to get, like my boss used to tell me 'To get your foundation in place' so that you feel like you're prepared and ready to begin a family, I think that's a very huge challenge.

As highlighted previously, women are socially condoned and their femininity comes into attach if they first don't take care of family responsibilities (Fels, 2004). In addition, in keeping with social expectations mothers spend more time with childcare responsibilities in comparison to fathers (Carnevale, et al., 2018). However, these cultural expectations do pull women away from career opportunities and this having a negative effect on their ability to expand on their human capital (Schwanke, 2013). In some cases, not having this human capital, which represents skills, experience and knowledge gained via regular employment, curtailing women's career opportunities and this leading to poverty (Budlender, 2011). Captured in the next section, my study participant provide advice on how women can respond to barriers as they navigate their careers and aim to attain senior leadership roles.

"The success of every woman should be the inspiration to another. We should raise each other up. Make sure you're very courageous: be strong, be extremely kind, and above all

be humble." ~Serena Williams~

Challenges and Barriers Advice

In exploring how women respond to these challenges as posed to my 13 study participants, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of data and in form of advice were: building people networks, own your power, build your skills and self-awareness. From this, 54% of the participants viewed people networks as crucial in

women's career progression, equally with owning your power, followed by building your skills at 38% and self-awareness at 30%. In addition, 76% of study participants emphasized on the importance of having mentors guide them through their careers and how keeping these close relationships have been strong sounding boards in their leadership approach.

Building People Networks

How do we get more women on top? This was a question that Birgit asked herself during our interview and in aiming to answer it she suggested that getting one woman on the top will help promote more women to the top. She stated, "So I think that there is a real awareness now among women in leadership that we need to support women into leadership. I mean it's that line 'empowered women, empower women' and recognizing that we need to be consciously actively supporting women in leadership roles and particularly women of color that we need to be centering those voices." This was a powerful statement to make and one that resonates with me. There are many times when we can recognize ambitious, talented women working to navigate their careers and can therefore be allies for them. However, there are even more times when these talents aren't recognized even if they are there. As such, support for these women and their career goals may get lost. This is where the advice from my study participants on building networks is crucial. Networking and surrounding yourself with the right people, supportive people, as a method to achieve career mobility and attain senior level leadership roles did not come up via my literature review; however, 54% of my study participants highlighted it as important. In providing advice to women wanting to navigate their careers, Olivia indicated that "women who are successful are often

connected to other women who are successful.” As such her advice is to “Find a woman that’s doing what it is you want to do and don’t be afraid to reach out and ask the question.” Courtney emphasized on surrounding yourself with the right people. People that will be supportive towards your goals and career ambitions. Many times, this starting at the core with the choices we make as we choose our partners. She stated:

A major thing is surround yourself by the right people, so in your relationship, the right partner right...So you know, sometimes when we hear women not being able to move up in their career...they don’t have, they haven’t surrounded themselves with the right people and supportive people. So, you know, sometimes people make tough choices and sometimes we make choices on who our partners are. And sometimes they can hold us back or they can lift us up, and again I’ve just been so incredibly fortunate that my life partner has been so inspirational and supportive, but not everybody has that...So I think just be aware of the decisions that you make.

Courtney makes great points. While this is soft advice, it’s quite impactful advice for women that do want to navigate their careers. We touched upon earlier on the fact that women spend more time with family responsibilities in comparison to men. Yet having a family is very important for many women. As such, surrounding yourself with the right people, the right relationships and choosing the right partner, contributes to how these responsibilities are managed. I shared previously; Alejandra was not able to move up the ranks in her career until she divorced her husband who was threatened by her success. I share this experience with Alejandra as the simple fact of navigating my academics and moving up the ranks was sought with resentment and pushback by my then spouse. This making the experience even more so challenging as I was facing the barriers that come along with pursuing an advanced education and navigating my career while suffering the repercussions in my own home. A silent form of oppression that perhaps women don’t like to talk about due to embarrassment and the guilt of wanting more outside of the

home. For many women this may be a reality and a topic that probably requires more research.

Alike Courtney, Suellen believes in the importance of having a community and people in your life that you can be real with and share your vulnerabilities with. People that will encourage and support you. She stated:

I think you need a community; I think you need support right. So, you need to have people in your life that you can be real with and encourage and support you...I think we are reluctant to show our insecurities our vulnerability and I think it's so important to in a supportive, confidential place. Because we all struggle and we think it's just us, and so that when you voice that, or you know you have self-doubt, and someone else shares how they see you, you're like oh, I can do this, or I do have support. That makes tremendous difference. It isn't realistic to be completely self-sufficient. We need support.

This community support does not always need to come from our close relationships. It can also come from professional environments. There are many resources and networking groups where women can exchange ideas and knowledge. Groups of women who perhaps are facing similar challenges and where advice and support can be provided on how to manage them. The key point here is that we all struggle, we all have self-doubt as Suellen suggested. Finding a community that is encouraging and can help manage these struggles does make a positive difference.

In addition to having a supportive community, Brianna stressed the importance of “building allies” and “finding people, men and women both, who understand that challenge, and can be your advocate, can be someone when you are not there, speaks with similar values.” She further advised that we don't only surround ourselves with like-minded people, but others that would push us to think differently and see the potential in us. She stated:

Not surround ourselves only with like-minded people that led us kind of be who we are, that with people who see what we are and who we are and how we're trying to be and help us to make progress. Not just say 'you are great the way you are', but actually say, 'these are the things that are great about you, and here's what you need to work on'...It's also I think, delving deeply into what you're doing, other people that we admire or that we think might have qualities that we want to understand how they obtained, or how to promote those. And then ultimately think it is once you're in work, to me it's really important to get lots of feedback, lots of feedback...I think, getting really good feedback about the areas that we ourselves know or other people have given us feedback on, that are barriers to our greater success and not letting that define us but getting that feedback.

Surrounding ourselves with people that we admire or have qualities we want to obtain can be quite impactful for women's career progression. Allies that would provide constructive feedback allowing women to work on areas of opportunity and this launching them to the next step in their careers. In addition, allies that can represent women even when they are not around. These allies can take shape in many forms as already suggested by study participants, yet another form being that of mentors or sponsors.

Mentors

Literature review conducted for this study suggests that mentors play an important role in the career advancement of women (Lublin, 2016; Orr, 2017; Abrams, 2019). Alike, 76% of my study participants indicated they had mentors, either formal or informal guiding them through their careers and were cognizant that the hands of others contributed to their success. The 23% of Senior Leaders that indicated they did not have mentors guiding their careers did suggest they had cheerleaders or influential and amazing people they learned from. A network of people that 54% of my study participants deemed important. Leaders they observed in action and learned from as they

navigated their careers. In addition, believing that mentoring was a key success factor to their careers, a selected number of Senior Leaders have either implemented formal mentoring programs for their organizations, or are now mentors themselves.

Learning how to recognize opportunities early in her career, those that perhaps she had not mapped out for herself, but helped her advance in her career, McKenzie recognized that her success was not a stand-alone act. She stated, “I don’t want to brag that somehow, I accomplished everything...I definitely recognize the hand of others in my success...be it mentors or sponsors all across the spectrum.” Similarly, Perla shared she had lots of mentors guiding her along the way “soft loving sometimes shoving hands all along my life that moved me forward” and whom she is very grateful to as they contributed to forming her leadership approach and career advancement.

Highlighting the importance of mentorship, Hannah’s advice to women wanting to advance in their careers is to choose a few limited numbers of mentors they can establish a close relationship with and ensure they understand what motivates them. In addition, she emphasized to choose these selected mentors not just to navigate one’s career, but to actually establish a relationship with them. She stated:

Yeah, so I actually think that my advice is you know, choose a few very limited numbers of mentors that you really establish a close relationship with and make sure they know you as a person not just as, oh this person wants to get ahead and that’s why they’re networking with me, but really that they understand what motivates you and takes a certain amount of you putting yourself out there. So, I think that’s important and then there’s the close circle of your mentors and then there’s the bigger connection...You have to stay in touch with a bunch of people.

Establishing a circle of mentors, experienced professionals willing to share their expertise has played an important role for women’s career advancement. Many women have

experienced their career soar as a result of establishing mentor relationships (Lublin, 2016). However, as Hannah alluded, keeping a relationship with mentors and not just viewing these connections as a networking opportunity is critical. The reason for this is that aside from having mentors, those that can help guide your career, by maintaining a relationship you are also establishing allies. Individuals that would be your voice and your representative when you are not around. Those that could vouch for you when promotional opportunities present themselves and support your leadership approach as it's established. Olivia touched on this point as well and the importance mentors played in her life.

Asking herself "How do I want to impact the world?" Olivia launched a strategy growth and development consulting firm at a very young age and indicated she always had the support of mentors, advocates and sponsors along the way, "I always had mentors, I always had role models. People in the community that pulls you into things".

She stated:

Did I have a mentor? When did I not! I have always had three types of people in my life that I would say...there's mentors that are up close, mentors that are far away and there's people that I would call mentor, advocate, sponsors that always advocated for me when I wasn't in the room. And so, because of that, I've always been able to just move through my life...and there were no women, I mean when I first started my company 34 years ago the person who really encouraged me to do it was a white male that I had worked with...He was like, you could do this, you should go and start a company, you can set it up...I learned so much from people who are mentors.

Olivia touched upon a great point when she indicated she had different types of mentors. In some cases, these mentors being people from her community that pulled her into things. I highlight this as important because many women don't have the opportunity to find formal mentors and can feel limited as a result. As such, it's critical to have those

informal mentoring opportunities as well. Abrams (2019) touches upon this and in her journey found traditional mentors limiting. As such, she too sought support from an array of alliances. This provides women with a more relaxed approach to finding mentoring opportunities. Opportunities that can be critical not only to women's career progression, but individuals that can be a good sounding board as leadership barriers arise. Alike the 76% of my study participants I too have surrounded myself with an array of mentors. Whether these have been formal, informal, supervisors, colleagues or individuals I looked up to. Yet always seeking their input on multiple aspects of my professional and even personal life. As a result of these influences, I've had the opportunity to pursue higher education, progress in my career, make my voice heard, construct a leadership approach and continue to seek career advancement opportunities. Today, I continue to have this approach and find deep value in mentors. What's more, I aim to be that mentor for others.

"If your actions create a legacy that inspires others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, then, you are an excellent leader." ~Dolly Parton~

Own Your Power

Viewed as a sustainable method of women empowerment, 54% of my study participants believe in the importance of owning your power. In owning your power, you are in control of your actions and willing to scale brick walls to reach your career objectives. When you own your power, appreciate your value and know that failure is sometimes inevitable, you are taking action towards your career aspirations, believe in yourself and what you can achieve. In short, you take ownership of your career! Resilient ambitious women, those that advance in their careers are known to own their power and take ownership of their careers. In owning their power they are acting in a courageous,

resilient, manner. They are taking calculated risks, managing ambiguity and don't allow obstacles to get in their way of pursuing leadership positions (Eldowney, et al., 2009; Orr, 2017). Hence, why 54% of my study participants highlighted "owning your power" as important for career advancement. "I think women are much more questioning of their own ability than they should be, and sometimes they should just go for it." advised Victoria. Expressing a similar thought process and while she highlighted the impostor syndrome as a barrier for women wanting to succeed in their careers, from an advice standpoint, Elva emphasized the importance of confidence. As such, she urges women to "understand and appreciate their own value". She stated:

Be confident in who we are. Be confident in our strengths and our own weaknesses and know that as women we are wonderfully made and wonderfully flawed...and strut both because that is how we learn to grow, and if we then don't know who we are, we will then allow anyone to transform our mind based on what they want us to be or believe. I was taught as a young child you believe and you build yourself so that you know who you are and who you want to be. I was taught that before I even realized what I ever wanted to do. But as my mother continued to drill that in me.

Being confident takes a great deal of resilience and successful women like Elva, learn this at an early age (Rimm, 1999). They learn it, practice it, teach it, and pass it on to others. This is important as we have learned that confidence can be crushed along the way. That as a result of structural and societal gender stereotypes women may lose track of their strong attributes and strength within them. This loss diminishing how they view themselves as contributors and future leaders. As such, the messages that Elva passionately gives aspiring women is quite powerful and perfectly captures the key message about owning your power. Women must speak up in ways where they stay true to themselves. They must lead with authenticity and not in the way others expect them to

do so. Irrespective of career advancement and attainment of senior leadership roles, women must stay true to who they are. If they don't, they will be contributing to the barriers that other aspiring women will face as they too navigate their careers.

In owning your power, Kate, emphasized on the importance of owning your power in the right way. In a way where women can be transformational, diplomatic, yet authentic to their leadership styles. Where they are able to influence in a “soft and nonthreatening” way. She stated:

So, there is a big, big problem with how you own your power. Right, how do you own your power and own your influence in a way that is, I mean, I hate to say this, but like soft and not threatening...and it's not like you can't even be challenging in a positive way. So, I think that is a big, big one...in order to sort of overcome that, you have to be very deliberate, and you have to be able to read the room well.

Women hold skills which are diplomatic in nature, and this is key to successful organizational leadership (Coates, 2011). In addition, they have a sought after 21st century leadership style which promotes a more inclusive, trustworthy and humanistic approach (Adler, 2015). Having these attributes naturally in them, women are able to own their power and influence in a “soft and not threatening way” as Kate advised. As such, women should own their power and influence with authenticity; this allowing them to stay true to themselves and their leadership approach.

Study participants talked about the barriers women encounter as they navigate their careers and the importance of understanding them. In owning your power there is an invigorating focus on overcoming these barriers. Whether describing barriers as “fences or brick walls”, the message was consistent ‘you have to get over them, you have to scale them, you have to keep a positive attitude while developing a thick skin’. The reasoning

for this thought process is that it empowers aspiring women by not placing their career aspirations at a stall. It helps keep them moving towards the direction of their career goals, while not allowing obstacles deter their path. In this approach aspiring women are not only owning their power; they are taking ownership of their career!

Emphasizing that the real question is how you understand and digest those barriers so you can pivot them, Perla stated:

The real question is how do you start to digest and understand those barriers and then be able to pivot into 'I see the fences and how am I going to get over each one', and I think what we have to make sure that women in particular don't think that to get over the fence every single time you've got to sprint over it. Sometimes you get a chair, you climb up onto the post and you leverage yourself over it, and sometimes you need help getting over it... You don't have to be a super athlete, but you have to be committed to winning and you have to be committed to serving... You know, we've got to be willing to lead and part of being willing to lead is both standing up for yourself and the community you represent... Women always think they have to be perfect. You don't have to be perfect, just have to be willing to try harder.

Having a similar thought process, McKenzie indicated that at times you will hit a brick wall. However, it will be your decision to scale it, or seek a different direction, while keeping a positive attitude and allowing disappointment to motivate you. She stated:

I think you have to keep a positive attitude and it's okay to let disappointment motivate you if they're motivating you constructively... You know, there are times you are just going to hit a brick wall. And sometimes you have to decide 'do I have it in me to scale this wall, or do I need to turn around and head in a different direction'.

This approach, expressed so passionately by McKenzie and Perla, are great reaffirmations of while not easy, how resilient women own their power and don't allow obstacles to get in the way of their career aspirations. It's crucial for aspiring women to take this approach. Especially those born into the minority group or into poverty, they

simply don't have the luxury of giving up (Abrams, 2019). They have to own their power, scale the brick walls and keep on the path to their career aspirations! From personal experiences I can share there are multiple brick walls to scale and fences to climb. However, aspiring women don't have the luxury to sit back and wait for the walls to get torn down by others. They have to take action into their own hands, even if it means tearing it down one brick at a time.

As women navigate their careers and scale brick walls, yet along the way hitting barriers, disappointment and failures are inevitable. As such, Melina believes "in being flexible and being okay with failure." She further suggested that "people have this idea that leaders are perfect and there so not, and we're all human, we all make mistakes, but how do you learn from those mistakes...when you know better, you do better." Along these lines, Alejandra believes in the importance of having "thick skin" while understanding, but not accepting, that there will be times that while not fair, women will be treated differently, and other times will fail. However, the key is how they move forward. She stated:

I think it's so important to not accept but understand there will be times where you will be treated differently because you are a female. And it won't be fair, and it will be frustrating and annoying...and until we can change it, you have to power through it to prove people wrong. And that is why I say thick skin is so important. As I've grown in my career, I have had people you know, tell me that I couldn't do certain things, or giggle...I'm comfortable in my own role until someone tells me I can't do something, and then I' feel like, I'm just going to prove them wrong...I think there will be situations that will be uncomfortable, there will be situations that where you will fail. And it's okay, men fail all the time, and they don't kick themselves or they might in private, but they can bounce back and move on in seconds.

The fundamental message here is that failure is inevitable as women navigate their careers or step into leadership roles. Yet we learn from failure and as a result, this gained

wisdom can lead to success. Female leaders of today hold this same thought process. They understand that barriers, failure and discrimination are inevitable. Yet, they are developing the attitude that these are challenges that must be overcome (Eldowney, et al., 2009). In doing so, these female leaders are owning their power and taking charge of their careers! While at the immediate this may seem like a burden on women, in the long-term this approach increases the numbers of women in senior leadership roles. Women that can then help others rise with them!

Build on Your Skills

Building skills to ensure women are marketable as they seek career advancement and the attainment of senior leadership roles was viewed as important by 38% of my study participants. Doing so takes an understanding of knowing one's deficits and what needs to be done to fill the gaps, as indicated by Brianna. She stated:

Sometimes just be understanding 'what is my deficit', or what is the deficit for people in this profession and how can we bring that in...so can I take an outside course...can I spend some time you know, four or five hours a week working on a different project that give me the exposure.

In taking ownership of their careers, women do need to understand their professional deficit. This is an area that can't be overlooked and crucial for career advancement. There are many times where women are passed up on professional opportunities because of areas they are lacking. Areas that can be difficult to spot, yet easy to fix. Identifying such areas of opportunity is crucial. If not addressed, women's career can be stalled indefinitely and this contributing to the glass ceiling. A phenomenon which continues to restrict women's access to top leadership roles (Powell, 2011). This is where the use of mentors, individuals who have the outside view can more easily spot areas of opportunity

and help. As previously highlighted: there are already plenty of barriers to women's career progression. As such, an area where women would have control of their careers is in the enhancements they make to their skillset. In this case it is crucial women understanding their deficits and execute a plan on how to tackle these.

Providing similar advice, Alejandra's and Melina's guidance to aspiring women is to invest in their career by building their skills, taking self-development classes, pursuing higher education and looking into executive coaching or mentorship opportunities for themselves. In addition, McKenzie was strong on learning on the job and taking advantage of hands-on experiences. She stated: "When I started with this company, I set out to learn everything I could learn about whatever I could learn about". This approach not only allowed her to learn different aspects of the company but gave her exposure and prepared her for the senior leadership role she holds today. Learning on the job is a magnificent way for aspiring women to gain new skills; those which will lead to opportunities in senior leadership roles. Many women have approached this knowledge acquisition by taking on diverse projects within their current role. Others have navigated hands on learning by welcoming lateral moves. These types of moves may not initially represent a promotion, yet they can lead to promotional opportunities as a result of the gained skills and exposure.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is a responsibility of the self. It takes place as individuals understand and practice self-reflection on what they want, learn to recognize opportunities, and the barriers at hand. This includes how they approach this. As such, 30% of my study participants viewed self-awareness as important for women wanting to

navigate their careers and seek to obtain senior leadership roles. Victoria emphasized on the importance of knowing what you want and being clear about it. She stated: “know what you want, you really need to be clear about it and you need to let people know because they’re not going to figure it out for you”. Knowing what you want allows the opportunity to set clear goals and a path towards accomplishing them. Letting people know about your goals contributes to building the people network that 54% of the study participants expressed as important and the allies that can help you get there. However, just as essential as knowing what you want, Brianna pointed out on the importance of understanding the barriers, those keeping you from the career mobility goals set for yourself. She stated: “I think really being analytical about what is the barrier, because sometimes it’s us...or sometimes it’s something that no one has actually ever examined”. Finally, as a critical component to self-awareness learning how to recognize opportunities was an important factor for McKenzie. The reason she views this as important is that these opportunities may not necessarily be in the map that you draw for yourself; however, you don’t want to miss out on them as they can lead to career advancement. She stated:

I have many years in finance...many different roles. When the opportunity presented itself to go into operations for one of our subsidiaries, I said yes because I’m going to say yes to those opportunities I didn’t always have yet to recognize. That they maybe this wasn’t on my map that I drew. But I don’t always get to draw the map, right. If you’re trying to follow the path you set out for yourself, you’ll miss the ones that will get you there faster if you don’t take some of those detours...So I think, recognizing where you are, and trying to get the most of what you’re doing, that’s enough for people to see the level of commitment, the spark.

Self-awareness in many ways is connected to owning your power and taking ownership of your career. In this aspect reflecting on your vision and creating a path for

achievement. Reflecting on the barriers and opportunities that come along with that vision. Just as critical, recognizing that at times deviating from the path you created to attain such vision will still help you get there. If a senior leadership role is the goal, steadily moving up the ladder is one path. Yet, moving laterally or even down so that you can move back up is another. However, always having the self-awareness of where you are and where you want to go.

Research Question 1: Summary of Findings

Evidence arising from this study and research conducted by experts in the field confirms that the barriers women encountered when first entering the workforce and navigating their careers while diluted, are present for women in the 21st century. Specifics of such barriers are highlighted via the literature review section of this study and reemphasized by my 13 study participants. To recap, in answering Research Question *1) What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?*, my study participants, prominent women in their field, holding senior leadership roles, suggested that: *1) lack of confidence, 2) family responsibilities, 3) building a voice and 4) gender stereotypes* are significant barriers to a women's career progression. My study participants further viewed *1) building people networks, 2) mentors, 3) owning your power 4) build your skills and 5) self-awareness*, as important in overcoming these barriers. In the next section of this chapter I answer research question *2) What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?*, and look at the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve senior leadership roles in their field.

Research Question 2

The second research question this study sought to answer was, 2) *What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?* To find the answer, the following interview questions were particularly meaningful:

- a) What type of strengths and skills do women need in order to make it to senior level leadership roles?
- b) What skills or strengths were particularly important for you as you advanced in your career?
- c) How can women who aspire to take on leadership roles obtain these strengths and skills?

Study participant responses were organized in two categories. These are: 1) *strengths and skills women utilize to achieve senior leadership roles* and 2) *study participant advice on how aspiring women can attain these strengths and skills*. Each category captures recurring themes that would help address the research question, followed by quotes from study participants aligned to each theme and a brief discussion.

Strengths and Skills

While women face many barriers in the path to career advancement, research indicates those that do advance in their careers and reach senior leadership roles, have key attributes that allowed them to succeed in their field. They have a strong academic background, mentors guiding them along the way, practice resilience, exercise their soft skills, are transformational and lead authentically. Most significantly they take ownership of their careers by making an identity shift that allows them to view themselves as leaders and move towards the path of their professional goals. These are confident women that

take risks and move barriers in spite of hearing “No” along the way (Rimm, 1999; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Coates, 2011; Ibarra, et al., 2013; Sandberg, 2013; Adler, 2015; Lublin, 2016; Stevenson & Orr, 2017; Abrams, 2019; Wardell, 2020). Research findings align with the perceptions presented by my study participants during the interview process on the strengths and skills women utilize to achieve senior leadership roles in their field and which will be reviewed next.

In exploring the strengths and skills women utilize to achieve senior leadership roles in their field, as posed to my 13 study participants, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of the data in some cases overlapped with how women responded to challenges overcome. These themes were: building relationships and collaboration, empowering teams, developing hard skills, good communication skills and the use of soft skills. From this, 62% of my study participants viewed building relationships and collaboration as critical. Viewing empowering teams equally as important, 62% of my study participants found this to be a must skill to have. Followed by the use of soft skills at 54%, developing hard skills at 46% and good communication skills at 38%. These findings align closely with factors related to how women lead which contribute to an organization's success. These factors being women's flexibility in leading, cultural acumen, relationship building and diplomatic nature. In addition, their transformational leadership style that incorporates an inclusive, trustworthy and humanistic approach (Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Ayman & Korabik, 2015; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017). Finally, the use of soft skills that are sought after in the 21st century and which women leaders exhibit (Adler, 2015).

Building Relationships and Collaboration

Building relationships and collaboration was an overall theme throughout the study. This is no coincidence as it aligns with women's relationship building leadership approach (Ayman & Korabik, 2015) and this providing a foundation for effective leadership. In answering research question two, 62% of my study participants expressed that for women to attain and be successful in senior leadership roles, collaboration and relationship building was imperative. As such, women need to embrace the opportunities of building solid relationships as these can lead to gaining new skills, learning from diverse work cultures and leadership approaches. In addition, it can lead to exposure to career advancement. However, upon the building of new relationships study participants also expressed the importance of keeping up with these relationships and not just reaching out when something was needed as this can have a tainting affect.

Being quite specific about highlighting this skill, Birgit believes that in a women's world in order to be successful you have to be collaborative. She finds this skill to grow naturally in many women while recognizing that the mindset of many women is to "rise and fall together". She stated:

I think with our world to be successful; you have to be collaborative and I think that comes very natural in many women. In a recognition that we rise and fall together, that I'm not going to succeed unless we succeed, and I think that's more of a female mindset. And I think in my experience, more women down to the marrow of our bones believe that, and so we try to do it all together.

Studies have shown that women's leadership approach, which include building relationships and collaboration, contribute to an organization's financial success (Adler, 2015; Ayman & Korabik, 2015; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017). As such, women's

natural instinct to collaborate and rise and fall together as Birgit highlighted, are contributing to women's career success, while benefiting the financial health of the organization they lead. Previously reflecting on gender stereotypes as a barrier for women's career progression, Birgit pointed out that 85% of women employed in her field are women, yet only 15% are in leadership roles. She pointed out that to get more women to leadership roles, more women need to be in top leadership roles; hence, "women rise and fall together". Getting more women to the top in addition to contributing to an organization's financial prosperity, would provide role models for high potential women who through natural collaboration will then lift others (Welburne, et al., 2007). A natural domino effect to women's attainment of senior leadership roles.

Viewing collaboration as a "captain obvious skillset" that women learn from a young age, Perla believes it should be placed as a high priority and applauded. She stated:

Let me start with one kind of captain obvious skillset. You know, people always talk about how collaborative women are, right. And it is often thought of as a very soft skill, 'your collaborative and that's nice', versus, 'your collaborative and that's fierce'...Using that one really important skill we have to use is collaboration, that which we learn when we're young, which actually is super helpful, so clap being collaborative, it's a high priority.

Successful women have defined leadership in terms of being effective listeners and communicators while facilitating collaboration. Therefore, as we continue to evolve and appreciate what women bring to the leadership table, soft skills are starting to be highly sought out. Furthermore, as a result of exercising these soft skills more women are reaching top levels of organizations at a more common rate (Paulidi & Coates, 2011). So, women indeed need to continue exercising their soft skills and being "fierce"!

Perla further touched upon the importance of leveraging relationships and using both of these skills (*collaboration and leveraging relationships*) to elevate women and help them succeed. This being a significant focus for her and the work she does as a public servant. Building relationships was a significant theme throughout this study given the importance study participants placed on it. This theme first arose as form of advice while answering research question 1) *What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?*. It was elevated again in response to research question 2) *What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?*, in the form of strength women utilized and then again as advice. To emphasize, building relationships is extremely important not only for women's career advancement and to help elevate others, but to accomplish the organizational mission and vision at hand.

Alike, Kate believes that aside from learning the importance of navigating organizational politics, relationship building is a key. However, she also suggested that some women may shy away from it or are fearful about it. She stated:

I think the relationship piece is really key and I think you know a lot of women in particular shy away from this idea of networking, but building and fostering relationships and not just calling when you need something, but checking in with your contacts...keeping those relationships fresh and alive so that people know that you're thinking about them.

Kate further suggested that building solid relationships is "extremely powerful" and as "connectors of society", women in leadership should embrace it. I concur with Kate; women are the connectors of society and being connectors comes with a great deal of responsibility. Without this human characteristic that women hold so deeply, disasters would prevail. In organizational settings how women lead, how women connect, has

shown to have its profits and it's something we need to continue embracing. The question is why are some women fearful about it and as a society, for the greater good how can we intervene? I have expressed my position on this topic. This being that structural and societal gender stereotypes have played a role in what is perceived to be women's lack of confidence and their struggle to build a leadership voice. The question does remain how do we intervene? Is it by instilling confidence in women one woman at a time? Is it by further examining our culture and educating others on its oppressive nature for some members of our society? There is much to be said, and much to be learned on this topic. Yet, the advice from my study participants stays consistent: relationship building is important for career advancement and to succeed in senior leadership roles.

Olivia may have an inclination as to why this is occurring and urges women wanting to obtain senior leadership roles to view relationships building in the mindset of "confidence and I belong here" vs, "scarcity, I'm putting someone else down". She stated:

I think the other scale is really around relationship building because oftentimes women we're used to being sole operators, and we get really insecure when other people and even other women start to, we feel it's like a territory creep or something. So, you have to have this skill of confidence that 'I belong here'. That 'I want to build relationships here', as oppose to 'I'm nervous and somebody trying to get, or take something from me'. You know, that scarcity 'I can't move up unless I'm putting someone else down' none of that.

Given that women do tend to "rise and fall together" as Birgit suggested, the mindset of scarcity and I'm taking away from someone else if I receive, is prevalent among many women. I myself a strong intelligent woman in a leadership role, and who studies other women in leadership roles, have experienced the scarcity mindset. This has resulted in

missed opportunities for me in the areas of career advancement as I would not pursue positions because I thought I was taking it away from a more deserving colleague, but perhaps I could have attained. This scarcity mindset had the additional consequence where I was not making connections with leaders that would have perhaps connect me to other opportunities and I as a result could have also introduced to others. Therefore, like Olivia, I too urge women to put themselves out there, build relationships and get away from the scarcity mindset that leads to missed opportunities for many.

Empowering Teams

Along these lines of collaboration and relationship building, study participants found empowering teams to be key to leadership success and operate under the belief that leaders are only as great as their teams. As such, leaders must build high functioning teams that have more knowledge than they do. Where leaders can build on the teams' strengths yet develop areas of opportunity within the team. To ensure success leaders must have the ability to influence, inspire trust and empower others to meet their full potential. In accomplish this, leaders must create an environment that is inclusive of all different kinds of people in the organization. To be conscious of gender and the actions taken to ensure a diverse environment. Alike, Adler (2015) suggests that women leaders exhibit an inclusive humanistic approach, a skill key in building strong teams. In addition, studies conducted by Seo, et al., (2017) find that women leaders are more transformational in comparison to men and this providing a positive impact on the teams' morale.

Once women, or men alike, have reached a certain level of leadership, it's important to acknowledge that at that point the success of the role depends heavily on the

people it leads. I've always operated under belief that leaders are only as great as their team and to ensure success, we must inspire trust and empower one's team to meet their full potential. Similarly, 62% of my study participants found empowering teams to be key to leadership success. Therefore, this is a skill that women must embrace as they navigate their career and attain senior leadership roles. McKenzie indicated: "For me, the most successful senior leaders are successful team members. And you can't do it by yourself. And what I have enjoyed about being in finances, we're advisors to the business, we're partners at the table, we're counselors". Kate, believes that leaders need to build teams that have more knowledge than them and be comfortable enjoying their team's success. Contrary to the popular believe that the team should make the leader look good, she believes that the leader should make the team look good. She stated:

You need to be okay going outside your comfort zone...be very humble in your knowledge base and be comfortable brining other people who have more knowledge than you...Like the people I hire are all like much better at what they do than I would be. That's how it should be. I'm a good manager. You know, really supportive, I have a quick mind, but they're the experts and I want to rely on them. So, it's like being comfortable with delegation...Being comfortable enjoying the success of your subordinates and not feel like it has to be attributed to you in order to build yourself up, because that is the typical model right. Typical model is subordinates make the boss look great and my feeling is I should make my subordinates look great. That's what I want, I want them to look great and by proxy, then I look competent.

Resonating with Kates thought process, in addition to learning early in my career that leaders are only as great as their teams, I also learned on the importance of hiring those that in their areas of expertise know more than the leader. A strong leader once told me "I like to hire A's, people that know more than me and never hire C's to hide my deficits". This approach has stayed with me and it's where being humble in your knowledge base, as Kate highlighted and elevating other people who have more knowledge than you, is

important to a leaders success. This goes back to Olivia's point on the mindset of scarcity. Unfortunately, many times the scarcity mindset that some women may suffer from prevails not only within their colleagues but can also affect the very teams these women lead.

Hannah advised that when building a team, leaders stay conscious of gender, incorporate that into actions taken and think about what they are doing for the diversity around them. In addition, she urges leaders to think about how they are promoting and supporting others because in her practice as a leader, it is not about her individual contributions, but how she motivates others. She stated:

I wonder how to articulate the how conscious we need to be of our gender and how to incorporate that into the actions that we take. And then I think the other piece is, you know, I do think that we need to be conscious of what we're doing for the diversity around us. And how we're recognizing and supporting and promoting other people. And that comes later in one's career when one feels that developing other people is the way that you have an impact. Certainly satisfying, but more than that, I mean, I do think that in most of my roles that it wasn't what I individually contributed, but what motivated other people to help with and the quality of people I surrounded myself with.

If we are to elevate more aspiring women to leadership roles, leaders do need to be very conscious of gender and how to incorporate that into actions they take as they build their teams. This goes back to my findings on barriers where I highlight that women represent 57.1% of the US working population ([US Department of Labor](#)), with 40% holding positions in managerial or professional roles ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)). Yet women continue to face barriers in attaining senior level leadership roles across multiple fields ([Fortune](#), 2019; [Pew Research Center](#), 2018; Seo, et al, 2017; Schwanke, 2013; Johns, 2013). With these barriers connected to gender stereotypes structurally ingrained in our

culture and which place aspiring women at a disadvantage as it relates to accessing and attaining senior leadership roles (Schein, 2001; Fels, 2004; Singh and Terjesen, 2008; Eagly and Sczesny, 2009; McEldowney, et al., 2009; Powell, 2011; Ryan, et al., 2011; Johns, 2013; Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013; Hopkins and O’Neil, 2015; Northouse, 2016; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017; Kubu, 2017; Carnevale, et al., 2018; Aydin, 2020; Offerman and Foley, 2020), as leaders create their teams, they absolutely need to be conscious of gender in order to create an equal playing field for women.

Inclusivity and creating an environment where team members can thrive was Brianna’s advice. She believes that in this open environment team members may challenge your leadership, but encourages this because they may have ideas that are better than your own. However, she also urges women in leadership roles or wanting to attain senior leadership roles, to also have knowledge and expertise about the area of focus as this will allow them to manage expectations accordingly. She stated:

I think that’s okay if you’re leading, while you’re being inclusive of all different kinds of people in your organization. You’re asking them to give the best of everything they can at work and you’re trying to create that context that allows them to do that. And that context is where they might challenge your leadership. And they might put forward an idea that’s better than your own and being okay with that and elevating that and bringing that forward. So, I think that’s a really important skill, is how you get enough feedback as a leader that’s authentic and real that you can use and apply back to your organization and not make it all about your own self. But also have that knowledge and experience that allows you to say...‘that’s such an excellent idea, but the timing is a little off because it’s going to cost 100 million dollars in the middle of this other system transition. But how can we apply the thought and effort that you put into that towards what we are already doing so when we finish this were a leg up on what you want to do’...People are offering you all this stuff, you can navigate it and keep people motivate.

This thought process builds on Kate’s advice where she urges women leaders to surround themselves with teams that in their field have stronger expertise than they do. This is true,

yet it's also true that the senior leader also needs to have the knowledge and expertise so they are able to lead the team more effectively. Similarly, Suellen believes that in addition to women in leadership roles being competent in the areas that they oversee, they also need the ability to influence and build high functioning teams. Furthermore, provide a space for teams have a voice. A voice which will guide leaders in making better decisions for they are influenced by those on the ground conducting the work. She stated:

What's important to me and I won't say to everyone, but I would say, one of my strengths, I think, is building high functioning teams. I think I do that because I respect my employees and build on their strengths, listen and hopefully provide space for them to have a voice right. And we're going to make better decisions if we're listening to the ones doing the work. And as a leader, we often feel the responsibility to know the answer, and yet, as a leader, it is for us to help us get there, not to have the answer. And so, to me, you know the best leaders are the ones that bring the best out of people and listen and respond.

Teams are the backbone of an organization. They are on the ground conducting the work and many times can see and hear more than the leaders themselves. As such, by creating an environment where team members feel heard, respected and valued, creates a solid foundation for the leader. Additional allies' leaders can turn to for advice, ideas and better ways of accomplishing the mission at hand. A soft skill many women leaders already have, but must continue to embrace.

Exercising Soft Skills

Exercising soft skills in women's leadership approach has been a theme throughout the study. Research suggests that those critical soft skills that allow women to be transformational when leading has been deemed an important approach to the path of career success (Rimm, 1999; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Paludi & Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). As highlighted in chapter 2, Rimm (1999) advises we

raise our daughters to be confident, brave, authentic and transformational women. Reassure them that the leadership characteristics that are gender-stereotyped as female don't necessarily interfere with career success. On the contrary, they should embrace these characteristics to benefit their careers and exercise those critical "soft skills" associated with listening, communicating effectively and with emotional intelligence, which women tend to possess when leading. In line with this research, 54% of my study participants highlighted soft skills as a strength women utilized to achieve senior leadership roles in their field. This included exercising authenticity, operating with integrity, influencing others, being aggressive while staying true to their leadership style and having courage of their convictions. In addition, having a leadership mentality where women are able to look at the big picture.

Always operating with righteousness, Hannah placed a "very high value on integrity and honesty". While she did suggest that this may not always "get you ahead in all circumstances", for her honesty and integrity are an important trait in leadership. "I guess I wouldn't want to get ahead if it wasn't connected with integrity and honesty", she indicated. Early in her career Brianna learned the importance of being authentic, with this being especially important as women get to senior leadership roles. She stated:

So early in my career I learned to not mimic anybody. Don't mimic men, don't mimic the playbook on how to be a good leader. Take all the information in but then the number one thing, especially the higher the level leadership you go, where you have much more autonomy, decision making, influence, you know, especially in a corporate or business world, what you say goes right with the knowledge of what it is the business is doing and what's needed regardless of what kind of leadership role you're in...Otherwise when you get to that upper level and the very top level I think some of the most important things are to be very authentic. To really be able to be ok with who you are, and the reason why that's important is to be able to accept that you're constantly going to be learning,

potentially criticized or wrong.

Exercising authenticity and those critical soft skills that allow women to be transformational when leading has been deemed an important approach to the path of career success (Rimm, 1999; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Paludi & Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Hurley & Choudhary, 2016) and this leadership approach allowing women to reach top levels of organizations at a more common rate (Paludi & Coates, 2011). In addition, the ability for women to lead freely and in their own skin will further close the gap where society has deemed “think manager think male” the prevalent leadership approach.

Staying true to the importance of inspiring and motivating others, Elva believes you can't be a good leader if you can't influence. She's accomplished this by leading her team by example even in the most challenging of times. She stated:

I wanted to have skills that where I was able to influence, if you can't influence, you can't be a leader. You have to be able to have skills that inspire and motivate. I motivate my team; I inspire my team to do more than they ever thought they could do. That's being a transformational leader. You also have to have the ability to problem solve. To be a creative thinker, to be adaptable. Take the pandemic, for instance. The entire pandemic, I had to move my team from fear to being resilient. I had to make sure I was able to provide the services to the entire campus. Even though deep down inside I was concerned of catching the same thing everybody else...If I'm going to lead a team of over 800 people, I cannot lead from a computer. I had to be on the campus in the trenches with them.

This is a great example of how a true transformational leader by exercising the soft skills deemed important by 54% of my study participants can inspire and empower their team. Which as a recap, was found to be imperative in good leadership by 62% of my study participants. However, it's critical to highlight that while empowering the team, it's also important to lead by example even if this means being in the trenches with them. Good leaders can't just leave their teams to drown in times of challenge. They must exercise

their soft skills, lead by example and move the organizational mission forward. If not, their ability to lead and influence in the future can be jeopardized.

Developing Hard Skills

While there is a high degree of importance in being a transformational leader, one that builds relationships, empowers teams and exercises the sought out 21st century soft skills, there is no doubt that the development of hard skills is crucial. During our interview session Courtney made an important statement that has been highlighted throughout this study. She stated: “Women can’t afford to take any shortcuts if they want to progress in their careers...in comparison to men, women need to have everything in their back pocket, the degrees, the certificates, the skills and experience” (Courtney). The development of hard skills is indeed crucial and was emphasized by 38% of my study participants as an important method to overcome challenges. Similarly, in highlighting the strengths and skills women utilize to achieve senior leadership roles, 38% of my study participants stressed the importance of developing hard skills which are aligned to women’s career area of focus. For Suellen, it was developing her financial skills. She indicated: “Well, for mine, I felt it was important to have the financial skills right. To be able to build spreadsheets, to be able to do analysis, to be able to plan, budget, things like that. Like the hard skills.” Olivia also finds that the biggest skill needed for women to attain senior leadership roles is to build on your expertise. She stated: “I would say, one is just expertise. That’s the biggest one, is you got to know your stuff because you’ll be tested in every way. So just knowing your product.” In addition, she adds that by having this core skill and “knowing your competence level” will allow leaders to project themselves in that way. In short, knowing the business and having the hard skills to back

it up, adds to women's ability to lead with confidence. As a result, for others to have the confidence in them and follow.

Communication Acumen

Strong communication skills or lack of, can set leaders apart. Leaders holding strong communication acumen are highly sought out and respected, while leaders suffering from poor communication can be deemed as incompetent. In order for women to build a strong leadership identity their communication skills must be mastered. As such, the importance of communication acumen was highlighted by 38% of my study participants as they too viewed effective communication to be key for leadership success and tied to how others view the effectiveness of leaders. This thought process is aligned with current research which specifies that many successful women define leadership in terms of being effective listeners and communicators whom facilitate collaboration and change (Paludi & Coats, 2011).

Kate indicated that "being a good communicator and writing well, I think, is really very important to leadership." Similarly, while emphasizing that women are highly intelligent, Hannah also placed good communication as a must needed skill for women wanting to attain senior leadership roles. She stated: "You know, I do think, women need to be smart and you know, usually they're smarter than men. Anyway, but women need to be smart, I think they need to communicate well." This is also emphasized by McKenzie who indicated that when looking to promote aspiring leaders into senior leadership roles, she is definitely going to look for someone that has the experience. However, what would stand out for her is great communication skills. She stated:

I'm definitely going to be looking for all the requisite skill for the role and experience. But in terms of recognizing kind of what's going to make a difference, and what I think women bring to the table that I find kind of as a semi super powerful...I'm going to look for someone who has great communication skills, can be very collaborative, and knows how to challenge in way that isn't intimidating.

In being collaborative, yet knowing how to challenge without being intimidating, strong communication acumen is a must and here is why. It's difficult for a good leader to challenge the status quo without being intimidating if they can't properly express themselves. This being jeopardizing for women in senior leadership as their authority would be questioned and their skills deemed incompetent. Along these lines, Courtney, highlighted on the importance of a leader's delivery and use of words and how getting a coach can help in such occasions. She emphasized how course correcting takes work, but it's imperative to work on as women are judged even on voice.

Strengths and Skills Advice

In exploring how women attain these skills as posed to my 13 study participants, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of data and in form of advice were: courage, people network, volunteer and seek feedback. From this, 62% of the participants highlighted courage as crucial in the attainment of skills women needed for career progression. This was followed by people network at 31%, volunteering at 23% and seeking feedback at 15%. Advice from study participants on how women can attain these skills is explored in this next section.

Courage

Courage was highlighted by 62% of my study participants as important in attaining the skills women needed to advance in their careers and move into senior leadership roles. In this instance, it was the courage to ask questions, ask for what you want and stay true to your convictions. The courage to seek mentors and to stand up for what you need and not be intimidated to join the conversation. To have the courage not to break down when the situation gets tough, but instead be self-aware and support each other. The courage to think about how you become creative, innovative and create your own truth. Most significantly, the courage to capitalize on your strengths and move forward with resilience.

Kate, indicated that as children we all hear “no question is a stupid question”, yet she’s in meetings constantly where women just don’t ask questions out of fear. Therefore, she views getting over “the fear of asking” and “the imposter syndrome” as imperative to career growth. Similarly, Perla believes that “we should not be afraid to ask for the help” and be okay with getting this help from others that may have a different skill base from us. One that can be beneficial in our knowledge growth. She stated:

I think we should not be afraid to ask for help. To say ‘you did something really well I want to learn, would you be willing to sit with me and educate me about it?’...I have a colleague who told me recently ‘I want to be able to do that, I want to be able to do what you do in this area’, and I said excellent, I can help, right. And I do that too, like I see things that you know, like Perla (*a colleague*), I called her one-night because she said something in passing to me that I didn’t fully digest...so I called her I said, explain how this financing works. And she’s good, and she’s such a teacher. She was able to help me understand something that changed the way we do public policy. She has the talent, she has the skillset, she has the knowledge base. I asked her for help, and I think we have to be okay with that.

Asking others for help does indeed take courage because as women we are supposed to be able to manage and know it all. If we ask for help we may deem that others are catching us in the act and confirm that we don't have all the answers and fit for our leadership roles. That we are impostors only pretending to know how to manage, how to lead, how to exercise our role. However, this thought process is completely wrong and this is why it takes courage to ask for help. As we are asking for help and expanding our knowledge base, we also need to consider we are making important connections by doing so. Those connections which can place us in the path of career advancement. So have the courage to raise your hand and ask!

Experiencing this behavior in the workplace, Courtney has noticed that women don't always let their desires known. Yet, the men reporting to her are always very direct in asking for what they need. As such, "knowing that's our Achilles Heel" she advises women to practice on asking what they need in the workplace. She stated:

So, one thing I've also noticed, sometimes we don't let our desires known. And it may be by accident, but I have had men tell me very directly what they want, 'I want more money, I want more title, I want more authority, I want next step, I want this,' but we, and again, I'm stereotyping, but we usually don't do that...I'm sure there's data on this...and so know that I'm aware of the data, I see the behavior in the workplace. So, I have women who report to me and I have men, and all the men are much more assertive on their career and ambitious, and the women are very indirect...So I think knowing that that's our Achilles heel on practicing. And I've actually gotten much better at it. Sitting down, with you know, my boss, and saying, 'listen...I want to move on, could I get your support?'. Women don't do that much.

Along these same lines, Victoria believes that women wanting to attain senior leadership roles must have the courage to put themselves out there as others may not be aware of their leadership capabilities. This she indicates is a mistake, one that can lead to missed opportunities. She stated:

I do think that it's important for women who aspire to leadership roles to recognize that their leadership may not always be visible to others, and so be conscious of that and maybe a little willing to put themselves out a little bit more, because they can't assume people will see leadership in them the way they know it's there and that is a mistake.

Not having the courage to ask for what women need has many side effects, including women missing out on knowledge expansion, promotional opportunities and even the negotiation of their own salaries. These factors being detrimental to their earning potential. Literature review findings suggest that in 2003 only 12.5% of women negotiated their salaries, versus 52% of men (Babcock, 2003). In addition, women hesitate to raise their hands for higher level promotions as they are fearful of disrupting their already hectic life (Lublin, 2016). These factors contributing to women earning as much as 83% of what men earn in similar jobs ([Pew Research Center](#)). While these factors may also be connected to other societal issues such as gender stereotypes and how women perceive they are viewed, having the courage to ask can only help align these inequitable situations.

A strong believer of the power of mentoring and never being afraid of building crucial career relationships, Melina urged women “don't be afraid to ask for mentorship from women that you admire...surround yourself with likeminded women and foster those relationships.” Having the courage to ask men in leadership— what they were doing, what were their challenges and how they attained success, Elva advise was to not only talk to women you admire, but men as well because most of the time men are mentoring the strong women we meet. She stated:

You can form groups, you can work with other women who you aspire to be like, who inspire you. Not just talk to women, talk to men to. Because most of the time, many of the strong women you meet, they're being mentored by a man or

sponsored by a man. Because men, the men are the ones that were empowered when I was coming up. So, there weren't very many women to look up to, or women that I ever even worked with. Most of who I worked with were men. So, I had no shame to ask them what they were doing, what they were challenged by, how did they attain success, what would they do all over again, what would they tell their younger self. So, I had no issues what so ever. Most of the answers I cringed, but I still got the answer. You just have to be careful what you asked for. And then when I was able to talk to women, oh my God, I was just too excited and many of them would start out first by telling me the challenges that they faced, all the barriers, you know, and that they would cry.

Men can indeed be great allies for women and aspiring women must also seek their mentoring and support. Currently with more men in leadership roles aligning with men as well is imperative for women's career progression. However, when women seek men as mentors, they must have the courage of staying true to themselves, continuing to lead with authenticity, not fall into societal pressures and mimic men's leadership approach as Victoria alluded in her advice to aspiring women.

Recognizing that women leaders "step into really big challenges when other people don't" Victoria believes a core strength of women is that it's never about them, it's about giving back, it's about others. In terms of the strengths that women need to have, she believes it helps if they're mission driven. This while being aggressive in ways where they have the courage to stay true to themselves and their convictions. Because women trying to act like men does not work well. Passionate about the topic she stated:

It really helps to be driven by the sense of mission, and that's a common thread...But the other thing is to be willing, I think, women need to be willing to be aggressive. But they need to be aggressive in ways that are true to themselves...I think women who try to act like men that doesn't work as well. Just staying true to yourself, but you do have to be a bit aggressive sometimes. The question, maybe is the wrong word, you need to advocate for what you believe in and what you believe should happen...Any leadership takes courage and having courage of your convictions. And it's so natural for women to want to please people, and you have to get comfortable, you're not going to make everybody happy...You know, if you are a mother of three, it's always your fault,

so fine you know, I'm used to that feeling and I think I say it's sort of helpful sometime for women to realize they are quite capable of not pleasing everybody. But I do think sometimes women will try too hard to please and make people happy when they lose, they just go with the courage of their convictions.

In reemphasizing what I previously stated, women must have the courage to stay true to themselves and lead with authenticity by not mimicking men's leadership approach.

Alike, Victoria urges women to be aggressive while staying true to themselves. However, aggressiveness in itself is viewed as an agentic leadership trait and may have negative connotations to women's leadership approach. As a result of second-generation gender bias this approach can view women as harsh or too masculine and their femininity would be under attack. This resulting in women being viewed as not suited for leadership roles (Kubu, 2017). It's a fine line aspiring women in leadership have to walk. However, women indeed must advocate for themselves in an approach that is comfortable for them yet makes them visible. This practice allowing women to advocate for what they believe and believing it should happen as Victoria indicated.

McKenzie urges women not to be intimidated to be part of the conversation.

Because if you let intimidation keep you from it, one can unintentionally reward intentional intimidation. A tactic that while presuming to be subtle, is very real. She stated:

Don't be intimidated. Don't see intentional intimidation as something to be rewarded by shutting down...At least in the South, it's very easy for a group of men to get into a dynamic that can intimidate women. You know, I have to talk about football all the time, so I watch football so that I can talk about football. I watched the golf tournament so that I can talk about the golf tournament. Because then there can't be a conversation going on that I'm not part of and so I have done things that I probably otherwise wouldn't necessarily have done.

Intentional or perhaps unintentional intimidation is prevalent. There's going to be many times when women experience this from their male colleagues and perhaps from female colleagues when the impostor syndrome or "think male think manager" phenomenon prevail. However, aspiring women or those already in leadership roles can't stay silent. They must have the courage to be part of the conversation. This may indeed require learning more about colleagues' areas of interest as McKenzie suggested. However, while always keeping in mind that first and foremost women must stay true to themselves and who they are as leaders.

Finally, Suellen advice to women is not to beat themselves up for their areas of weakness. Instead, she urges women to be resilient and capitalize on their strengths. She suggested that when we mess up, because we will mess up, don't beat ourselves up. Pick up and keep on going. Doing this takes courage, the courage one needs to keep moving forward in spite of failing. The courage of believing in one's strength in spite gender stereotypes telling women otherwise. She stated:

I think it's about capitalizing on your strengths and so, if you are this super strong driver right, go with that. If you're the nurturer, go with that, right. I mean, there isn't one way to do it. Men don't do it anymore way right and so don't hold yourself to behaving to be competent in all these areas. You build a team for that... You surround yourself by people who make up for the areas that you aren't as much. You know, there's plenty of things I can beat myself up on. But that's not motivating or energizing, right. So rather than do that, fill in somebody who does that well naturally, that that is where they get energy and motivation from. Have at it. And don't beat yourself up over so much that you're not that. Respects that, respect what you contribute as well... You know, resilience is super important and if we're so busy beating ourselves up, it's really hard to be resilient. So, something where I start with coaching, it's about a person's values, and I think that really matters. Where I have gotten myself into trouble and been unhappy and feeling overwhelmed, right, and feeling literally like I'm on a hamster wheel going, going, trying to prove myself, is when I'm trying to meet what I think is everyone else's expectation and I think it's really important that we reflect on what matters to us. And if we start there, and we're grounded in that, 'if

this is what matters, this is what I want to do', then we're not pulled off in all these other ways. And if we mess up, when we mess up, because we will, it's easy to recover when you are in that aligned centered space...than if 'Oh my God, I don't know why I did that, because I thought so and so wanted' ...That's a lot harder to recover from okay, because you're off balance...Pick up the ball and just keep going, keep doing, I screwed up, okay.

This is a great way to close this section as Suellen captures nicely how women can have the courage to stay true to themselves. How they can be strong resilient leaders by building on their strengths and surrounding themselves with people that compliment them or make up for their areas of weakness. In addition, how women must be kind to themselves and realize they are not perfect. It's imperative to emphasize this because the way that women in leadership carry themselves, is the message they are sending to others on how women in leadership should be. Depending on the leadership approach, it can send either a negative or positive message to aspiring or existing women leaders. This is critical as there are many women today, both aspirin women and women already in leadership roles, who have a difficult time constructing their leadership identity. As such, an identity shift must take place for many women in order to be transformational and lead with authenticity (Ibarra, et. al., 2013). The advice that Suellen provided is key in guiding this identity shift to happen. This identity shift allowing women to stay true to themselves and thrive as courageous, transformational and authentic leaders!

People Networks

Establishing people networks and building relationships was a theme throughout the study and highlighted by my study participants as key for career advancement. This theme was not surprising to me as women exhibit new sought after 21st century transformational leadership that incorporates more inclusive, relationship building skills

providing a social foundation for effective leadership (Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Ayman & Korabik, 2015; Seo, et al., 2017). Alike, 31% of my study participants viewed people networks as important in attaining the skills women needed to advance into senior leadership roles and provide support as women leaders face the pressures associated with higher levels of responsibility. “You can form groups, you can work with other women who you aspire to be like, who inspire you. Not just talk to women, talk to men too...ask them about their challenges” advised Elva. This thought process is aligned with Birgit as she believes in the importance of creating environments that support this approach. Environments where the voice of aspiring women can be heard and then modeling it. She stated:

I think we need to create environments that support that...and then model it and state it. Put it up front that we want women to rise...So I think a piece of it, too, in terms of what skills do they need, they need encouragement to bring their voice forward. So, it's like, 'we haven't heard from you, what are your thoughts' and create a safe space to do it...There's so much to offer, they need an environment where they can be heard and flourished.

I concur with Birgit that it's also the responsibility of women, and mean alike, in senior leadership roles to create an environment where aspiring women can thrive. This should not be a 'nice to have', it needs to be a 'must have' coming directly from leadership. Throughout this study I've highlighted the barriers women encounter and the skills needed as the aim to attain senior leadership roles. Via the advice received from my study participants I capture how aspiring women themselves can do this. However, in advocating for aspiring women, it's also important to ask 'what are others doing and what is the responsibility of leaders in elevating women? Do we leave figuring this out to aspiring women alone? The answer to this is no. While I do strongly believe and promote

that as individuals, we are responsible for our careers and need to take ownership of them. In doing so we are responsible at attaining the skills needed to help us advance in our careers, at having the courage to make our voice heard and should feel empowered to do so. There is also an organizational and societal responsibility. An institutional will to elevating aspiring women and creating a career path that would lead to their attainment of senior leadership roles and then succeeding in them (O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015).

Alejandra advised that it's important to have a close network, or at least one person to share frustrations with. This in return allows you to have a process that can contribute to the managing of difficult situations and stressors that can many times hold women back. She stated:

It's impossible even for me to have very thick skin. But sometimes something does pierce through that big shell that I have. It's important to have a close network. At least one person, but somebody that you can go to vent. That's not your boss, and not your direct co-workers...What I have learned over time is, if I have someone that I can vent to, or if I have a process that I have created for myself to get those feelings out and get myself to a more stable, peaceful mode, where I can get all the anxiety, anger whatever the emotion is out.

As women reach higher levels in their careers, they are indeed faced with challenging situations. Even for experienced professionals, at times challenging situations can be difficult to manage to say the least. As such, it is important to have a close network of people where women can either vent, or get advice from a different perspective on how to manage such challenges. Sometimes, just stepping out of ones thought process and gaining a perspective from others will help alleviate these stressors and help manage leadership burnout for women.

Believing she was quite fortunate to have great bosses, Hannah's, advice for aspiring women is to work with other women who have good skills and learn from watching them. While she did with work with men, she "got more working with women" because she could relate better to their leadership actions. She stated:

Maybe just sort of riffing off the experience that I had... You can work for a woman who has good skills and you can learn, you know from watching them... I actually think it's a good idea... I worked for men as well, but I think I got more working with women. That was helpful for me and maybe it's just because you can interpret into 'okay, this is what it looks like when a woman does it.' And then the other thing is, you know, I have for the most part had really good bosses... Seeking out a good boss and staying long enough.

I've always had a passion for learning about and from, women in leadership roles. I've aimed to do this throughout my career, as a research project for my master's thesis, and through my doctoral dissertation journey. It's an important topic because many aspiring women may not have other women already in leadership roles to look up to. As Hannah pointed out, it's important to have a point of reference on how women lead when you are a woman leading. This takes us back to the importance on women being able to lead authentically as themselves. In this scenario, if they are learning from other women whom are leading authentically, the "think manager think male" phenomenon Stein (2001) and Powell (2011), highlighted to will soon seize to exist.

Volunteer

Aligning closely to people networks, volunteering was viewed as important in achieving the skills women need for the attainment of senior leadership roles by 23% of my study participants. The reason for this alignment is both of these approaches: volunteering and developing people networks, give aspiring women exposure. Exposure

that can lead to career advancement opportunities and attainment of senior leadership roles. However, with volunteering for special projects or committee work, women have the prospect to both make connections and showcase their skills while gaining new ones. Kate, advice for women is to get out of their comfort zone and volunteer for committees that would push the boundary out their existing role. She stated:

The advice I would give people all the time is get out of your comfort zone, volunteer for committees. Sort of reach out, try to push the boundary out of your role. Don't allow yourself to be so pigeonhole. Ask your boss if you can work on a special project or ask a colleague if they're doing something interesting 'can I help, I want to learn more about that'.

Kate highlights a great approach that allows women to get out of their comfort zone and in a less stressful way, make connections while learning new skills. Correspondingly, Olivia's, advice for women is to get involved, raise their hands and be willing to help. Even if this means getting out of your comfort zone as this will be an opportunity to learn and gain exposure. She stated:

You know, I think what I would tell women in today's world, there's so many opportunities to get involved. Volunteer, look what you're doing with the advisory council right, you raised your hand and said I'm willing to help. And what are the skills that you learn from that, presentation skills, organizational skills, shared expertise...communication and presentation skills. I mean you speak up, you ask questions, so finding a place where you're comfortable doing something you enjoy. You don't necessarily have to be comfortable, but you can create comfort. And then putting yourself out there. Because the more you do it, the easier it gets. 'So how do I put myself out there...And something that I enjoy doing'. Do you have a passion for certain kind of work? Or you know, 'something I'm really interested in', then you're not afraid to put yourself out there. And that's when you start to learn.

In being very careful about not disclosing Olivia's identity, I had the opportunity to meet this amazing leader, during my time volunteering for a committee. To recap on her background, she is the President and CEO of a workforce development agency that works

with some of the world's largest brands and Fortune 500 CEO's on DEI priorities. She is an established author, recognized internationally and named to *Forbs Top Texan Women in Business*. Her inventory of accomplishments goes on. The point here is that as a result of me raising my hand and volunteering, I had the unique opportunity to meet this leader. This came with great rewards as I was able to learn from her and can now share this gained knowledge with others. Had I not raised my hands the doors for this volunteering opportunity would not have opened and I would not have made this important connection.

While highlighting volunteering as core to women's professional visibility, Victoria strongly advised to be strategic about it. Specifically, for women that are juggling family responsibilities she recommends they be selective of the volunteer work they do. That they don't necessarily need to join 10 committees, but perhaps join the ones that would give them most visibility, the ones with the highest profile. Being strategic is really key indicated Victoria, and further stated:

So, the advice that I often give...and I think it's probably good advice in this, is so first, because women are often juggling family as well, they tend not to be as available for all of the committee work or leading a workshop... You always start out with small assignments and people see how you do, and so, being very strategic. So, if you're juggling you know, a family and stuff in those early years of your career, you don't have to say yes to everything. In fact, you shouldn't say yes to everything because you'll be asked to do way more than is your due. But be strategic and what you say yes to and think it through. So, for example, I would advise young women with kids...okay traveling is going to be really tough, so you don't have to say yes to every speaking invitation. Think through the ones where you're going to get the most visibility. Think through the highest profile ones. But be strategic in steps that you take to get the needed visibility to give yourself a chance to shine. You know, don't just join every committee, but when they offer you the chairmanship of the committee, join that one because then you can control what is going on. Or you know, don't say yes to 10 committees, choose 2 and then make yourself the most essential individual on the committee, write the first draft of the report. So, it's being strategic, and you sort of have to

do that, because for many women, and I think it's more for women than men, there are other demands on your time. Yeah, so it's that being strategic that I would say is really key.

Volunteering indeed comes with many rewards, including learning new skills and gaining exposure to a network that can potentially provide advancement opportunities; this was well established! However, what Victoria highlights is crucial and must be kept into consideration when seeking or being sought after volunteering opportunities. As a result of wanting to prove themselves women can many times stretch themselves thin or work 50 times harder than their male counterparts. This resulting in their own burnout, as previously stated by Alejandra. While I did concur with her, that women can contribute to “our own burnout”, I also highlighted that there are studies suggesting that women with families do 2/3 of the household work and hold major responsibilities for childcare and family needs (Babcock and Laschever, 2009; Carnevale et al., 2018). Therefore, going back to Victoria's point of women being selective of the committees they volunteer for is imperative. This selectivity will allow them to keep balance while doing an amazing job in their volunteer work. The worst position aspiring women can place themselves in is stretching themselves too thin by taking on too many volunteer opportunities, on top of their already demanding lives, and this resulting in poor product delivery. In this case the exposure gained reflecting poorly on them and not highlighting their true abilities.

Seek Feedback

Knowing your weaknesses and understanding the skills that must be developed to strengthen them is crucial for career advancement. Many of times, as individuals we can recognize our areas of weaknesses and work on those. However, there are also many of

times where it takes an outside eye to highlight them. As such, 15% of my study participants highlighted seeking feedback as an important factor to career progression. Courtney emphasized that “just being self-aware and willing to invest in feedback that you receive” via a mentor or professional coach can be significant to women’s credibility in the workplace. Alike, Brianna suggested that “once you are in work” it’s really important to get plenty of feedback to what may be the barriers “to our greater success” and don’t let that define you, but ensure you are getting the feedback. I concur that seeking and receiving feedback is highly important. However, you have to be cognizant that this feedback may not always be what you want to hear, but sometimes it’s what you need to hear. This requires a humble perspective where the persona is truly open productive criticism. Yet, empowering yourself and understanding that feedback is like a gift. If the feedback suits you and allows you to stay true to yourself and your leadership approach, accept the gift. However, if the feedback deters you from your values, staying true to yourself and how you wish to be viewed as a leader, understanding that it’s ok not to accept the gift even if it comes with the best of intentions.

Research Question 2: Summary of Findings

Via the lived experiences of my 13 study participants, I moved to answer Research Question 2) *What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?*. In exploring the strengths and skills women utilize to achieve senior leadership roles in their field, as posed to my 13 study participants, to recap, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of the data in were: 1) *building relationships and collaboration*, 2) *empowering teams*, 3) *developing hard skills*, 4) *good communication skills* and 5) *the use of soft skills*. In understanding

how women can attain these strengths and skills as posed to my 13 study participants, the recurring themes that stood out in the form of advice were: 1) *courage*, 2) *people network*, 3) *volunteering* and 4) *seek feedback*.

In the next section I move on to answer Research Question 3) *What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?*, I look at how the lived experiences for each of my 13 study participants prepared them for their senior leadership roles and what they believe being transformational is in leadership.

Research Question 3

The third research question this study sought to answer was, 3) *What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?*. To find the answer, the following interview questions were particularly meaningful:

- a) How did your previous work experiences help you in your current leadership role?
- b) What are some of your previous life experiences that have an impact on you as a leader?
- c) In relation to leadership, what do you think being transformational is?

Study participant responses were organized in three categories. These are: 1) *previous work experience*, 2) *life experiences* and 3) *transformational leadership*. Each category captures recurring themes, followed by quotes from study participants that are aligned to each theme.

Prior Work Experience

In exploring how prior work experiences contributed to my study participant's current senior leadership roles, as posed to 12 out of the 13 study participants, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of data were: skills gained over time, people network, organizational knowledge, previous executive experience and failure leading to success. The overarching theme at 83%, was skills gained over time. This was followed by subcategories which include: people network at 42%, organizational knowledge and previous executive experience, equally at 25% and failure leading to success at 17%. Not falling under any of these themes when asked the question a) *How did your previous work experiences help you in your current leadership role?*, study participant Courtney expressed that she set clear career goals for herself and study participant Perla expressed that she was selective on who she chose to work for. The question was not posed to study participant Elva due to lack of time during the scheduled interview.

Skills Gained Over Time and Over Arching Themes

Given that skills gained over time was the overarching theme that my study participants viewed as an essential work-related experience that aides them in their current senior leadership role, in this section I highlight what they had to say about skills gained over time, while incorporating the overarching themes that followed (*people network; organizational knowledge; prior executive experience; failure leads to success*).

People Network

Coupled with skills gained over time, 42% of my study participants viewed people networks (*a recurring theme throughout the study*), in aiding them in their current senior leadership roles. In some cases, people network also helping the senior leaders navigate organizational systems and politics. People network having impacted her career directly, throughout the interview Hannah talked about a manager that not only mentored her but took her under her wings and taught her how to navigate “political issues” and “assess talent”. Skills she continues to exercise today as she has found to be valuable in navigating her senior leadership role. To the contrary, not initially viewing a senior leadership role in her career trajectory, Birgit had a difficult time answering my interview question (*How did your previous work experiences help you in your current leadership role?*). However, upon attaining her current senior leadership role, which arose from the commitment she had towards her organization, she confirmed that she learned how to navigate her role from her people networks. She stated:

I’ve only been at (*organization name*), so it’s been a lot of trying to learn from one another...I think sometimes people who have different work experiences in different environments learn different stuff. So, I’ve kind of had to just try and soak it up, do my best. Not quite sure how to answer this because...How I ended up in my career path was I was an intern therapist coordinator, a manager and then a CEO...I had no ambition to do any of it...I think I was a manager in our domestic violence programs...The agency was circling the drain financially. We were in a tough spot, and it was just like I pulled together. We all pulled together. But I kind of was the catalyst for it. I’d come into the office on a weekend and literally on a whiteboard figure out what the hell we are going to do.

While not knowing she would be in a CEO role, and none the less leading her organization out of a difficult financial time, Birgit highlighted a great example on how people networks can help new and aspiring senior leaders. What is more, I believe it was

her people network that gave her the confidence she needed to thrive and as a result help her organization survive during this challenging time. One thing to highlight, and Victoria touched upon previously, is that “It really helps to be driven by the sense of mission”. Having a sense of mission and dedication to the organization one leads, does have impact. This impact attracting the people network needed in order to continue to thrive as a leader. Being driven by the sense of mission and people network, are intertwined. This connection making it difficult to lead without taking this relationship into consideration. On the other hand, quite rewarding for leaders when these two strengths are combined.

Indicating “it’s always about people” and “learning from the top”, Olivia attested that her previous work experience and her company collaborating with big corporations helped her learn how business works. This as a result has helped her navigate the multiple senior leadership roles she’s held. In addition, she has incorporated all the learned leadership skills into her current practice and now teaches this to others. She stated:

My previous work experience, my company going into big corporations. Us going in, we’re training them leadership culture, diversity and inclusion. All of those things really taught me how business works...So that was first, just being in a space where you had an opportunity up close and personal to lean from the top. Corporations and organizations in the country and in the world, so you get to feel uncomfortable because after a while you realize that all have the same challenges. It’s all you know, it’s always about people. Nobody’s perfect, so it gives you a different perspective on things. So, I think those experiences helped...So, it’s taking all of those leadership skills, coming together, and then continuing learning and applying best practices.

Taking into consideration that not all career paths will provide a global experience perspective to aspiring women, unless they choose a specific field of work that would do so, the key point here is that Olivia took all of the experiences she gained and

incorporated her learnings into her current practice. Being sensitive to the fact that corporations are formed by people, regardless of global location, she soon learned they all had the same type of challenges. This recognition was significant to her career as it helped form her leadership perspective and approach to conflict resolution. Olivia presents a concrete example on how women leaders can build their leadership toolbox, via skills and experiences gained overtime. A spaced yet steady approach that leads to impactful and lasting results as it did for Olivia.

Still utilizing the skills she learned from her very first job, which Alejandra indicated was almost like boot camp as she had to learn quickly how to work and communicate with people of all ages, has allowed her to understand diverse perspectives. As a result, she learned how to be “politically savvy” and “navigate tricky situations” very early in her career. She stated:

I learned how to communicate with people of all ages. I was 18 working with people from my own age, all the way up to their 70s. Understanding people, there's a variety of perspectives and it's not always one right way of doing things. There may be multiple ways of doing things...For me, because my roles have always included what I would consider to still be those roles that got me here, I feel like I continue to maintain that route in where I came from. That really helps. And I think the biggest thing that I learned early in my career that I use every day now is political savviness and just understanding how to navigate tricky situations.

While not ideal, politics are inevitable in almost every organization and learning how to navigate them is a key skill to have for aspiring women wanting to attain and succeed in their leadership roles. There are, however, very few people that learn how to navigate politics early in their career as Victoria did. Therefore, to help navigate the organizational politics which can get complicated and demoralizing it's imperative to build people networks. Peers, mentors or friend's woman can go to for advice as they continue to learn

the ropes of their role. And as they learn, sharing their perspective with other women to further strengthen collaborations and contribute to the bond that as women “we rise and fall together” as Birgit indicated.

Focusing extensively on the importance of people networks, Brianna believes in the “power of relationships”. Relationships that help guide her to be a great leader. A leader that can elevate the voices of others and help them have a seat at the table. In addition, aiding her in building “influential” and “beneficial relationships”. She stated:

I think a lot of some of this is the power of relationships. I don't mean power in a sense of powerful, but the importance...So figuring out who are key stake holders, who are people who are influential toward people who maybe are overlooked. Or organizations, whole departments that are overlooked, but who may need to be heard and have a seat at the table. So, to speak and then influentially framing collaborative mutually beneficial relationships with them. Not showing up just to say ‘hey I need you to be able to be the VP of HR, but now I want to be relevant to you and the work you're doing’.

Elevation the voice of others is in line with my belief system. As women, or men alike, grow in their careers, it's highly imperative that they take into account that this growth comes with responsibilities. Not only the responsibility to the role or organization, but the people the role serves. Individuals that may not have a voice or are scared to exercise it, as is the case for many women as previously noted. People networks can help accomplish this through key stake holders as Brianna suggested. Committed individuals that can help aspiring women not only elevate their voice, but also put them in a position where they can elevate the voice of others. This continuing to opening the doors for aspiring women wanting to attain senior leadership roles.

Organizational Knowledge

Along with skills gained over time, 25% of my study participant's highlighted organizational knowledge as important in helping them reach and navigate their senior leadership roles. Kate indicated that "there's obviously the tactical stuff, the skills you gain over time" that can help navigate your career. However, she further suggested that a broader knowledge of the organization is helpful in "moving up the ladder" and you will not be able to gain this knowledge if you're deep down within a unit. Therefore, it's imperative for women to navigate their career and take calculated risks that would expose them to other learning opportunities. This is exactly what McKenzie practiced as she navigated her career in finances.

Having a passion for finances, McKenzie knew that this skill would give her a seat at the table. In addition, it would give her an opportunity to learn all the different parts of the business while gaining extensive breath and exposure to the whole organization. This exposure and gained knowledge as a result placing her in a position of power, as she suggested. She stated:

What prepared me the most for the role I'm in now, is generally the things that sort of rattle me and anything that shifts the foundation just enough...I had always been in finance, and it was my passion, right. It gets you a seat at every table. It gives you an opportunity to learn all the different parts of this business...Jumping around getting exposure to different parts of the business I feel I've got extensive breath and had enough exposure to this whole organization to know how, what makes it tick all over the place. And so, that makes me come from a position of power...You know, it's just not ever going to enter your sphere. So, when you're sitting at the table with the other senior leaders, you really do have exposure and breadth that other folks don't have.

McKenzie highlighted great points that have not been thoroughly addressed in this study; the importance of taking calculated risks by moving around jobs and learning new skills.

A prime example of how women can take ownership of their careers. I have found this practice to be common among women that moved up the corporate ladder at a steady pace. In chapter 2 of this study I highlight that when conducting research for my master's thesis I had the opportunity to interview thirteen women in leadership roles. From these thirteen participants one stood out for me as she had progressed through her career at a steady pace. Therefore, I asked her how she managed to accomplish this steady progression. Her response was simple, she indicated that it was her ability and willingness to take calculated risks on career opportunities (Martin, 2010). Today she holds a senior leadership role at a public university where she once started as an administrative assistant. Alike McKenzie, these ambitious women pushed themselves past what they thought they were good at and stretched themselves to meet their full potential (Abrams, 2019). They then used this organizational knowledge gained to further advance in their careers.

Previous Executive Experience

Previous executive experience was viewed as significant by 25% of my study participants in preparing them for their current senior leadership role. This was whether they were “thrown into the lion’s den” as Victoria indicated, or “thrust into it outright actually being asked” as indicated by Brianna. Regardless of how they were introduced to their first senior leadership roles, these Senior Leaders viewed previous executive experience as imperative to the success of their current role. Using as an example “the hardest role” she had in her executive career, Victoria shared how that role prepared her to tackle the challenges faced by her current senior leadership role. She stated:

I'm using the hardest role I had when I became director of (*organization name*). Because the organization was just in such bad place and like my first all hands was the largest layoff in the history of the organization and I had to turn off the machines...it was just one really devastating thing after another. Having gotten through that I was never afraid of anything...I would say the experience of thrown into the lion's den, that was an extraordinary difficult leadership role and after that, nothing was difficult...Once you fail, like you're just never afraid of failure again because you survive, right.

While the focus of this section is to highlight that 25% of my study participants viewed prior executive experience as important in preparing them for their current senior leadership role, it is imperative I first address the elephant in the room. I'll start out by highlighting that Victoria is a magnificent leader. She holds her own and leads with strength, authenticity and grace. She is a true transformational leader! As such, the organization she directed prior to her current senior leadership role, while once in shambles, is running brilliantly as a result of her exemplary leadership during her time there. In addressing the elephant in the room, studies have shown that women are more likely than men to be promoted into leadership positions associated with greater risks or disapproval. A term referred to as the "glass cliff" (Northouse, 2016). In this instance, instead of exercising the "think manager-think male" phenomenon (Schein, 2001; Powell, 2011), the "think crisis-think female" (Haslam, et. al., 2011) is put into place. The reason why women may be favored over men when organizations are performing poorly is because they are viewed as having good people leadership skills. In addition, they can take the blame when organizations are performing poorly. Hence, "think crisis-think female". Having highlighted this, I'll go back to Victoria's point that after having the experience of "being thrown into the lion's den" with that being such a difficult leadership role, the gained experience absolutely prepared her for the senior leadership role she holds today.

Similarly, Brianna, while also being “thrust” into the role without necessarily being asked, talked about her previous executive experience as Vice President of HR and accounted how that experience prepared her for her current senior leadership role also as Vice President of HR for a different organization. While it’s a different organization and the challenges she experiences may be different, she found this experience valuable as she gained a sense of how to navigate these challenges. She stated:

So, I think early in my career my first VP, first really top-level job, I was thrust into it outshout actually being asked...I will say, being Vice President before this being my inaugural. If this had been my first role as a Vice President, I think it would have been a lot harder. It is still very challenging. So, one thing is just having, you know, some experience being at the top of an organization and a sense every organization is different. The challenges here are different...but having a sense of how you navigate complexity and challenge and adversity and discrimination. You know, sometimes as a woman, or especially HR, can be easily dismissed, right, it’s not important. In working through that in another organization was very informative to how we get started here right. So, you have those reference points of what does it take to show up at those board of trustee meetings. How do I position the information and sharing of the requests that I have in a way that allows them to hear it, perceive it as important and respond to it. I’m glad I did not have to do that or the first time at (*current organization*). So, I think just having some experience.

Having prior experience in a similar role can be significantly beneficial to senior leader’s success. To add to Brianna’s point, I would say that senior level experience, unless thrown into it as was the case for Brianna, can be gained gradually. Perhaps initially in smaller organizations or units where challenges faced are similar, but where the leader can navigate complexities at a smaller scale. Then gradually once these experiences are under their belt, seek out promotional opportunities that are at a larger scale and which resulting from the acquired experience the transition seemingly smother. This was the case for Suellen whom shared how her previous executive experience as Associate Dean

of Administration and Finances gave her the confidence to tackle the challenges faced in her role as Vice President for Business Operations. She stated:

So, I left (*organization name*) as Associate Dean...was recruited to (*organization name*), as Vice President for Business Operations, which honestly was very similar to my Associate Dean of Administration and Finance role, right. Oversight human resources, finance administration, special projects...So I knew those areas right. So, I had the confidence I could do that and I had lots of experience working with academics so going to work in an organization...I could speak their language and I understood. So, intellectually, with the administrators, they're interacting with a faculty, there I understood their motivations. I understood their cultures...So, I will just say speaking their language...I knew, I understood their challenges and listened and I didn't pretend that we had all the answers, we found them together.

This scenario, shared by Suellen, is an ideal example of how prior leadership experience where the promotions are gradual, can prepare aspiring women for senior level leadership roles. This is not to say making the transition is easy. Yet having the prior experience allows women to navigate the roles with confidence, as was the case for Suellen. This approach is perfect for the promotion of women. It sets aspiring women up for success as they are prepared to take on the new tasks at hand with stability and not running the risk associated to the "glass cliff" of failure. While failure can lead to success, as highlighted by 17% of my study participants, in scenarios where women are thrown into difficult positions, it can also have a damaging effect if women don't prevail.

Failure

Failure is inevitable no matter how much preparation we do. However, the task is to embrace that failure and "fail forward" (Abrams, 2019). While the topic of failure was integrated into other skills gained over time subcategories, 17% of my study participants viewed failures as an imperative lesson that prepared them for their current senior

leadership role. Highlighting that her previous executive experience was quite challenging, Victoria believes that experience has been vital to the successful management of her current role. She indicated that “once you fail, like you’re just never afraid of failure again because you survive, right”. Similarly, Melina indicated that everything in her life, the combination of her academic and professional journey, along with the failures that came along, prepared her for the role she has today. She stated:

I think everything in my life kind of prepared me, or led up to this place where I’m at right now. And how I think it’s a combination of my academic journey, as well as my professional journey, and I feel like you know, I talked a little bit earlier about failures, but I feel like those failures were lessons. And I have taken lots of lessons from the good, bad and different that has happened in my life and I really try to take those lessons with me.

While I’ve highlighted the “glass cliff” of failure and “think crisis-think female” phenomenon, as risky situations for aspirin women wanting to attain senior leadership roles (Haslam, et. al., 2011; Northouse, 2016); it’s also important to highlight those ambitious, resilient women whom during a time of ambiguity are willing to take on high-risk positions even though they may lead to failure as these prospects open the doors of career advancement (Stevenson & Orr, 2017; Hurley & Chaudhary, 2016). In addition, alike Victoria and Melina suggested, these failures are lessons which can lead to success and strengthen women’s professional experience.

“You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it.” ~Maya Angelou~

Life Experience

In exploring how previous life experiences impacted my study participants as leaders, as posed to 12 out of the 13 study participants, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of data were: early childhood experiences, people network, prior career experiences and self-realization. The overarching theme at 58% went back to early childhood experiences. This was followed by people network at 25% and prior experience at 17%. Self-realization was highlighted at 8%.

Childhood Experiences

As I wrapped up the interviews with my study participants I went back to where we started; their life experiences and touched on how these contributed to the leaders they are today. At 58% my study participants took me back to their early childhood experiences and drew on how these have had impact on them as leaders. As a recap, research shows that development of young girl's starts at a young age (Rimm, 1999) as such it is not surprising that 58% of my study participants took me back to their childhood years and highlighted the experiences they had then as contributing factors to the leaders they are today. As such, it's imperative that I recapture their stories to reemphasize the importance of grooming girls from a young age as this helps shape their future and prepares them for career success. For those that choose to, the attainment of senior leadership roles among multiple fields.

Having lost her mother at the age of four, Kate emphasized how this loss has allowed her to “keep perspective on what is important”. This approach has kept her strong when managing challenging work situations. She stated:

Well, my very biggest, one I've talked about, this is my own little leadership journey is the death of my mom. So, I was not quite four and my dad was left with four children age's four to twelve. And when that happens when you are young, you keep perspective. You really keep perspective on what's important and what's not... Many people ask me 'how in the world do you stand your job, like, how do you put up with the junk that you deal with' because a lot, a lot of it is difficult. And I say 'you know, at the end of the day none of it is life or death... So that's probably the biggest life lesson that has impacted my leadership.

Not everyone experiences loss from a young age, and most children have the opportunity to be raised along the side of their mother. When a young child experiences trauma deriving from the loss of their mother, like Kate experienced, this trauma can follow a lifetime and outcomes are not always promising. Having lost love ones myself, I concur with Kate that you keep perspective and challenging situations at work suddenly don't seem so challenging. To survive and succeed in senior leadership roles, keeping a perspective while staying true to one's values is important. Therefore, I would urge aspiring women, or those already in leadership roles, to practice this approach. To focus on the bigger picture and internalize that indeed "it's not life or death".

Also remembering her father's death, when having a bad day Perla thinks about the advice he would give her as a little girl. Advice that she described as "a little shot of courage". This, along with what she "absorbed" from the women leaders that she looked up to when she was a young girl has kept her motivated, giving back to her community and the younger generations to follow. She stated:

My father died you know, in 1993, a really long time ago and even now when I'm having a bad day I think, you know I need a little shot of courage, I think about my dad. About him just saying 'oh you're smarter than all those boys, get in there, you know and that's really what he would tell me. So, I just think emotionally, I still look to our elders. And the other thing I think just from a motivational perspective is whenever we're doing something important there are so many eyes watching us, and some of those eyes are little girls, right, and they may be little boys, but they're young people who their fate and their destiny is going to be

rooted. And I think about this from a really broad perspective, it's going to be rooted in our ability to engage in a meaningful democracy and do it in an active way, right...and so I take that role very seriously. That's very motivational to me, but I also think that for me, as a young woman, that I must have seen a lot of that, you know, and...I must have absorbed it right...And I saw these leaders and you know, Dolores Huerta, a woman named Jessica Barbeda, Maria Elena Duraso...So I could go through my list of women who I watched and that I could do that you know, or I want to do that, maybe I can't yet, but I will.

Perla shared a prime example on how early childhood experiences in the home, and within the community contribute to shaping a young girl's perspective in life. How little girls look up to women leaders and how having role models is so important for a young girls' development. As such, I urge women leaders to look back, think about their role models, and pay a forward by becoming role models themselves. This approach helping shape the future of the next generation of women leaders.

Recollecting on childhood experiences where her mother would tell her she should not be so restless and Brianna disagreeing with her, "why shouldn't I be was my reaction to that" has helped form her perspective on disagreements and conflict resolution. As a result, this has informed who she is as a leader and believes this is a critical skill to have as it allows leaders to work through conflict and different perspectives. She stated:

It's not a good trade, sometimes a bad trade, but I've always been oriented towards as soon as someone says you can't do that...or say you shouldn't do that, sometimes I should really listen to it because they are nuggets, but they say you can't do it, or when someone wants to tell me how to do it, like you can do that but you must do it this way, those are things that I resist and causes me to kind of go inside and think it through, it's like 'no I am doing it that way, yes I can'. And to me I think it's a critical skill for a leader because what I mentioned earlier, you get challenged all the time, you get new information after you've already made a decision, it can be quite demoralizing sometimes to feel how much you don't know or how wrong we could be. So those early life experiences where my mom would say something like 'you shouldn't be so restless' it upsets me now, why

shouldn't I be was my reaction to that. So, being able to have that disagreement that sort of conflict with someone else perspective and work through it at an early age and have open conversations about it and get to the point where you know, it could even be something you laugh about it now...I think that has really informed how I am as a leader. Like its okay for someone to see something differently and to just have conflict, but have it in a way that is useful.

Senior leadership roles are attached to multiple responsibilities which can also come with many disagreements from multiple parties. Having the key skills on knowing how to navigate these disagreements and managing conflict is a must. Conflict resolution skills can be gained overtime. Yet aspiring women would be better prepared to resolve conflict and disagreements if they learn these skills from an early age. As such, from an early age we must shape young girls by setting high expectations and viewing them a good thinkers and problem solvers (Rimm, 1999). By no means does this imply we should “throw girls into the lion’s den” or “toughen them up” in preparation for adversity. On the contrary, this harsh approach would have a damaging effect and can cripple a young girl’s confidence. Yet, we must prepare them from an early age so they can build the skills needed to confront difficult situations. So, they too can be change agents and contribute to a brighter future for themselves and other female leaders.

Also remembering her parents, in particular her dad who passed away when she was a teenager, and the advice they would give her as a little girl on “navigating challenging situations”, Alejandra uses these skills to manage conflict in her leadership role today. Watching her dad in action, as he would solve issues with other farm workers gives her the perspective that things aren’t impossible to solve, you just have to find the right path to get there. She stated:

Growing up we had to ride the bus to school...and on that bus ride...the very first experience in figuring out how to navigate challenging situations...The rowdy kids are in the back of the bus and you know, little boys are trying to grab you, or do things and you're in a confined space. How do you get away from those situations...And fights are brewing in the bus, and kids are passing drugs...All these things are happening in the bus...I knew enough from my parents who explained things to me that wasn't anything I wanted to get involved in. But also, I knew...my parents told me, 'everybody that's here in this labor camp there your extended family, these are your friends, you don't fight with them, you get along'...So for me it felt almost like a no brainer to tell them 'why are you fighting, we're all friends here, what is your problem'...So I learned very young no conflict is impossible to resolve...Those type of experiences have helped me in my leadership roles because I don't feel like things are impossible, I just feel like we have to find the right path to get there.

Learning from a young age how to manage conflict is both healthy for the development of a young child, and an imperative skill to have as children reach adulthood. As such, it's not only the responsibility of the parents to teach this to their children, but the community as a whole. As we connect this to women's career aspirations and the attainment of leadership roles, conflict resolution is a must as both Brianna and Alejandra alluded. Therefore, to ensure a smoother transition, this management skill must be introduced at a young age as stated previously.

Growing up with immigrant parents, Melina recognized the sacrifices they made and emphasized how she "never took anything for granted". She recognized that they, along with many others who "invested in her", helped shape her leadership approach. "I could have ended up so differently...so I don't take anything lightly". This is a reason why she is big on mentoring and helping those that follow. She stated:

I think growing up with you know, as a child with immigrants, I never took anything for granted. I think that's one of the things that I've kept with me. I've always valued the power of education. Reading is still my biggest thing. As soon as I get off this call with you, I have a book sitting right here...It's my favorite thing to do until my husband gets home. I think the experiences that have shaped me as far as how I lead, are the results of the people who have invested in me. So,

when I think about like my mentors, my guidance counselors, my parents all of the sacrifices that they made, I think that they modeled for me that this is a gift...I could have ended up so differently...So I don't take any of this lightly. I'm extremely grateful and I feel I want to make sure that others coming behind me have those same experiences. So, I think that's why I harp so much on mentorship.

Her gratitude towards the people that helped her growing up and appreciation of their sacrifices is a reflection of the woman leader Melina is today. Giving back to her community through mentoring programs she has implemented, or providing career advice to those that seek her out, Melina is a great example of an amazing female leader that is now paying a forward. Dozens of women and men alike, have benefit from her advice and their careers have flourished. This includes myself, as I learned directly from her early on as I navigated my career. Today, the advice I gained from her; I pass it along to others. This creating an ongoing dialogue where women are reminded that they have what it takes to pursue their career aspirations and lift themselves up and thrive!

Emphasizing that she is coming from a place of privilege, McKenzie looked back at her childhood and being regularly surrounded by her dad's friends who were men of power. This was the norm for her so she never saw them "as anything extraordinary" and as a result she never felt intimidated about being around people "who achieved a certain level of success". As a result, she was able to recognize opportunity and approach it with confidence. She stated:

I can't undersell that, but it sounds like I'm coming from this place of privilege. But I was lucky enough to grow up with, surrounded by...My dad was an entrepreneur, started a company, was very successful...His friends that I grew up with, I mean this is why he didn't want me to go to Stanford, because they all graduated together from a regional school, and all moved to Memphis together and then raised their children together. And they were fraternity brothers and sorority sisters and I was going to miss out on that if I went away to school...All of those people who were like uncles to me or godfathers, they all became

extremely successful people. I never saw them as anything extraordinary. If that makes sense at all. I honestly believe that comfort level developed early. Even though they were patting me on the head when I said I wanted to go to Stanford...So it's why I could meet with David Murdoch for ten minutes, without being nervous...but recognizing this is an opportunity, right, but he's only human, but this is an opportunity. That's a place of privilege I recognize very plainly because not everybody gets the opportunity to know and not be intimidated by somebody who achieved a certain level of success. I mean when I say certain level of success, one of those people was Jim Barksdale (*Netscape CEO*). He was someone who I spend every Christmas with who was my dad's roommate at the fraternity house in college. So, these were dynamic people who were going on to great success that I grew up around, right.

To reemphasize McKenzie's point that she is coming from a place of privilege as not every young girl has the opportunity to spend Christmas with the Netscape CEO and this contributing to her meeting with David Murdoch with confidence. I would like to go beyond that and focus how these experiences, while perhaps privileged, did help shape McKenzie into the confident leader she is today. One that learned how to recognize opportunities early on and pushed on in spite of being discouraged from those very people, in particularly men, that were extremely successful, yet whom she "never saw them as anything extraordinary". Building on this point, not all women grow up in a position of privilege. Not having this privilege can lead to viewing aspects they had no exposure too as extraordinary. At times when something or someone is viewed as extraordinary, it can also be viewed as unattainable. This is especially true when there is a lack of confidence. As a result, this "extraordinary" thing not pursued because it's viewed as unattainable. If young girls don't view their dreams as attainable, they will never pursue their aspirations and we will miss out on future doctors, lawyers, scientists and CEO's. Recognizing that not all young girls will start form a place of privilege and this complicating situations for some, as a community we have the responsibility to help

shape their future and instill in them they can accomplish anything they set their minds to!

Recollecting on her father's high expectations of her as a little girl, and Suellen wanting to meet his expectations, was the catalyst that contributed to her viewing herself as leader and not a follower. As a result, framing the confidence she has in her intelligence, value and leadership approach. This confidence and leadership approach opening the doors for her to express her opinions and inspiring others to listen to what she had to say. She stated:

Just as I mentioned my father having high expectation and my wanting to meet them, right. So, I wasn't going to be a follower. I mean it's not that I'm not at fault if I respect where there're going and I'm happy to support them. And I have confidence in my intelligence and my value and so I'm going to make sure my voice is heard, right. I have confidence I have something to contribute...but what really mattered with my relationship with my boss is I was able to voice when I disagreed. And that was extremely important to me because I'm being hired, I'm being employed for my perspective, my experience, my intelligence, my capabilities and I'm not just going to nod my head and go along with it, right. I'm going to express my opinion and what I so appreciate about our relationship is that he listened...Sometimes he changed, sometime he didn't, but it was a safe place for me to say 'I disagree here' and my concerns' right, and to not have it have any negative consequence on my voicing that. So, to me that's really what I seek from a work environment and try to create in a work environment is that space to be real and authentic and to hear concerns so they can be addressed rather than cover things up or that's inconvenient or I don't want to hear it, because it's going to bubble up and you're not going to have the best solution.

In this chapter I highlight that 38% of my study participants view the power of buildings one's voice, making themselves visible and heard as crucial in leadership and career progression. Suellen has ensured her voice is heard as she has the confidence instilled in her that she has something to contribute. So, expressing herself is extremely important to her thus practices it in her leadership approach. Suellen has decades of progressive

leadership experience, taking on higher levels of responsibility as she navigated her career. A true illustration of the sky is the limit when it comes to aspiring women pursuing their career aspirations. When I asked her ‘what were some of her previous life experiences that had impact on her as a leader?’, she went back to highlighting her dad; him having high expectations of her as a young girl and her wanting to meet them.

Alike 58% of my study participants, my early childhood experiences contributed to the women leader I am today. As such, I feel I can express my personal story in this space. I was very fortunate to have been raised by loving parents that instilled in me strong work ethics through example as I was growing up. They showed me the importance of navigating difficult situations; how to be responsible, independent and self-assured from a very young age. In my case, it was out of necessity as both of my parents, immigrants from Mexico, worked two to three jobs each in order to make ends meet and were constantly out of the house. In addition, my mother was always on learning mode and when she was not working, she was attending adult school so that she could learn English. Being the oldest of five, I had no option but to help look after my siblings and contribute to completing the house chores. This allowed me to gain a sense of responsibility from an early age. To further contribute in the household I learned how to be nimble and help speak up for the family as my parents did not speak English early on. I remember being no older than ten and the family being in a tight spot as my father had not worked for months. He was a hardworking and responsible man and the day came when he finally managed to get a phone interview for janitorial work at a private high school. My father did not speak English and the individual interviewing him did not speak Spanish. Therefore, my father put me on the phone and I lead the interview for

him. I remember telling the person on the other line how hardworking and responsible my dad was. How he deserved to get the job and that if given the opportunity he would not let them down. I was so proud of myself when I learned he got the job. This early life lesson was extremely powerful and like my study participants, has contributed to the women leader I am today. There is much to be said about how young girls are raised. How these early experiences can be impactful in helping shape their future. How they can contribute to building their confidence, their identity as women and the transformational leaders they are today. It is how I aimed to raise my daughter and hope she does the same when it's her turn. In the words of Susan Widham, President of Beech-Nut Nutritional Corporation, "Good Little Girls Shatter Class Ceilings" (Rimm, 1999, p. 92) as was the case for my study participants and many inspirational women in senior leadership roles.

People Network

The importance of people network came up as a theme in four previous sections. Alike, 25% of my study participants view people network as a life experience that has impacted them as leaders. Courtney admires leaders that can get through tough situations in a calm positive way. As such, she has built her leadership style from "observing people and noticing what is effective". She stated:

Oh, you know, I just copy what I see is really good out there...I'm not really a huge book reader...so I observe people and notice what's effective. So that's been really, really great...and most of it is being positive. So, what I've noticed most from leaders that I admire is that they have a way of getting through really tough times in positive light. They deal with even the toughest of situation calm, collect, positive, they don't get all emotional and high strong.

Constructing a leadership identity is imperative for women in senior leadership roles.

Building one's leadership approach can be accomplished in many ways, including

watching other leaders in action, as was the case for Courtney. Which, I have to add she is a strong and courageous leader that continues to break barrier in her leadership approach! As such, it's imperative that those in senior leadership roles, lead with authenticity and by being true to themselves as aspiring women may be watching. In chapter 2 I share my personal experience on how I constructed my leadership identity, which started out by mimicking the approach of others. However, with this approach I was not being true to myself or my personal values. This as a result would have set me up for failure as a leader. Fortunately, through guidance of my people networks, I learned I could be transformational while leading authentically as myself. This helped set the foundation as to who I am as a leader and hope I can be part of that people network that inspires other women to stay true to themselves and lead authentically.

Not recognizing herself as being a great leader, Birgit emphasized that what she believes she does really well in her leadership role is hiring really great people and ensuring they don't leave. She views her leadership role as "creating a container" vs anything else in particular she is doing. She stated:

I think it's funny, I don't recognize myself when you talk about what people say about me as a leader...What I say I do really well, is get really great people and don't chase them away, which is a lot...I think about the people that I'm lucky enough to work with and they're kind of astonishing. And so, it's like, I must be doing something right that they're staying here. But I don't think that it's more that I've created a container, than anything in particular that I'm doing.

This is a good example of how having a strong people network, in this case via great staff, contributes to a leadership approach and can help a leader thrive. As such, Birgit practice has been to surround herself with great people and find ways to retain them. Yet, while not part of the people network theme, there is a comment that Birgit made that I

would like to touch on. Birgit indicated: “I think it’s funny, I don’t recognize myself when you talk about what people say about me as a leader”. I have personally not experienced Birgit in her leadership role. However, from others sources I have learned that she is an exemplary leader that many admire. Therefore, it surprised me that she does not recognize herself as that. This comment does take me back to my literature review findings which suggest that in constructing a leadership identity, an identity shift must take place as it’s critical in the realization that women can indeed be successful leaders (Ibarra, et. al., 2013). While I’m not concluding this is the case for Birgit, it’s important to highlight that not making an identity shift when taking on a leadership role is an obstacle that can hold aspiring women back.

Hannah shared that she learned how to talk to men in leadership positions and draw up business conversation with them early in her career. She accomplished this by attending business receptions during her experience working in Asia. This has helped her navigate important conversations in her current leadership role. As such, she has found this life experience to be influential in her career. She stated:

I told you the thing about learning how to schmooze and go to cocktail...That’s influential as well you know, it’s helped me talk to faculty, talk to older men, in particular older men since we’re talking about gender. Because I went to these receptions that were filled with older white men and older Chinese man and you had to talk to them because you were one of the few women, and you had to think of some business, some connection, something you could relate to them...And I think that was also very influential in my career.

Similar to McKenzie, exposure to influential men early in her life contributed to her confidence as a leader as she is not intimidated by the presence of successful men. Alike, Hannah’s early career exposure to a network of business men, whom she had to draw up conversations with when attending receptions in Asia, was influential to her current role

as those conversations gave her the skills to talk to men in her field. As stated earlier, not all women will be in a place of privilege where they get to spend Christmas with the Netscape CEO, or in Asia attending receptions and networking with business men. However, these types of interactions are valuable to women's career success as they can help build up their confidence and communication skills. Yet they don't need to take place in mansions or abroad. As my own piece of advice, these type of life experiences can take place by joining local networking events or conferences. There are many opportunities that women can tap into which would help them build their confidence and key leadership skills. I highly advise aspiring women to seek them out as this will potentially place them in a new comfort zone and give them the opportunity to continue building their people network. Which again, has been a theme throughout this study.

Prior Experiences

Prior experience gained throughout their life by either working in different cultures or by learning how to manage those who undermined their leadership authority, was viewed by 17% of my study participants as impacting their leadership approach. Learning lean management, an Asian management technique which creates value by optimizing on resources and which Hannah was exposed to during her time working in Asia, was a life experience that was very influential in her career as she suggested. Given that she learned and became comfortable with this technique during her time abroad she was sensitized with it and has implemented into her leadership practice. Then, when it was implemented by her organization, while she initially received pushback, through perseverance she was able to gain buy in which contributed to the broader implementation of others.

First emphasizing the importance on having a life while balancing being a leader, Victoria shared life experiences that have contributed to her leadership approach. Unfortunately, these have been challenging experiences that she was exposed to earlier in her career where she previously stated she was “thrown into the lion’s den”. However, through those experiences Victoria learned to manage people she felt undermine her authority and shared her secret on how she now manages these situations. She stated:

There are things that are really important to me because they balance the responsibility that comes with being a leader, so those are important. I think it’s really important that you actually have life, right, you can’t just be a leader 200% of the time. You have to have a time when you can just let your hair down and relax or do something different... There’s certainly experiences where I felt people were trying to undermine me and you know, figuring out what they were doing and figuring out how to outmaneuver. I mean I haven’t had a lot of that kind of stuff going on, but it’s certainly those you always learn from those experiences. I remember a friend of mine really close friend saying, laughing once, when I was telling him about something and he said ‘you are deliberately letting people underestimate you’ and I said ‘yes that’s a strategy when they underestimate me their guard goes down and I could (*snap sound*). You learn some strategies along the way, you learn them because you’ve seen somebody do something you didn’t like and you want to figure out how to not let them do that in the future.

Being the transformational, resilient, cleaver leader she is, Victoria shared a brilliant approach that can indeed catch a critic by surprise. She deliberately let her commentators underestimate her and when their guards were down, she would go in and execute. As a female leader, in a field primarily dominated by men, she had no choice but to learn early in her career how to navigate that landscape quickly and with confidence! Perhaps those soft skills which women tend to hold that are diplomatic in nature which exude harmony and confidence; communal features such as nurturing and relationship building, once criticized and viewed as weak due to gender stereotypes (McEldowney, et al., 2009; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009) are becoming women’s secret weapon in leadership?

Self-Realization

While self-realization was not a theme that the majority of my study participants touched upon and only one participant (8%) highlighted it as a pivotal point in her career. It was important to incorporate for it aligns with the challenges section of this study where 61% of my study participants highlight lack of confidence, self-doubt, including the impostor syndrome, as a barrier in women's career progression. For Olivia, self-realization was pivotal in her career because it was not until that point where she realized she had achieved success in her career. This was irrespective to the fact that before self-realization she was running a successful \$20M a year consulting firm and impactful in different parts of the world. She stated:

I've been thinking about this question because there were some pivotal points when I went from my first job in Arkansas and I moved to Texas, and the courage, you know, leaving on my own and leaving my family and learning something new, that was early in my career. And then starting my company and just realizing that I had something that I could market, I could build, I can bring other people in. I mean that was a huge process there. And I was already doing it, running it, before I stopped one day, and this is typical I think sometimes in women 'this is a real business'. Because people say 'well you're just going to speak at this conference, or you're just going to talk to people. But it's like no, they're paying you a lot of money to do it...but you don't think about the dollars, you're just so busy doing the work...So I think that when I look back there was so many different points in there, or there was a point when I realized 'you know, I've done this, it's been very successful. I've had impact in different places all over the world'...So that's a great example.

The story that Olivia shared aligns with an identity shift that must take place as women achieve senior leadership roles. There is more entailed to becoming a leader than being put into the role, taking on more responsibility, acquiring and mastering new skills. It requires an internal shift in thinking where the leader has the realization that they have indeed arrived (Ibarra, et. al., 2013), "you know, I've done this, it's been very successful.

I've had impact in different places all over the world" as was the case for Olivia. It's critical for women that have attained senior leadership roles to make this identity shift as not doing so can be detrimental to the successful execution of their role. For aspiring women who make an identity shift early on perhaps empowering them to seek career advancement.

Transformational Leaders

Transformational leadership is a new leadership concept which focuses more on the charismatic and effective elements of leadership. It is a process that transforms people and it is connected to emotions, values, ethics, standards and long-term goals (Northouse, 2016). In addition, it is viewed as more compatible with a more feminine leadership approach (Powell, 2011). To understand what my study participants viewed as essential qualities of a transformational leader, I asked my 13 study participants what they thought being transformational was in leadership. The overarching theme at 50%, was being a visionary and from this, 33% of them added that to execute the vision transformational leaders aligned people on that vision. Supporting people's growth was viewed as an essential quality of a transformational leader by 33% of my study participants and from this, 25% of them believed that transformational leaders also have an evolving mindset. Standing as its own category, at 42% of my study participants believe that transformational leaders don't settle for the status quo.

Vision and Align People on Vision

Being a visionary was viewed as an essential quality of a transformational leader by 50% of my study participants. From this, 33% of them added that to execute the vision

transformational leaders aligned people on to that vision. Victoria indicated that being a transformational leader is having the ability to have a vision of the future and then aligning people around that transformational vision. She stated:

I think transformational leaders are able to paint a convincing picture of where they want the institution to be in the future. They can then align people around that transformational vision and then they can actually help the institution get there. And I think that that ability to see the future, see a future that's different from the past, to be able to bring people together around that vision of the future...and then start the institution on the path to getting there, for me that's what defines transformational leaders.

Connecting transformation leadership to vision is an imperative leadership approach for women in senior leadership roles. Highlighted as a barrier which I captured in chapter 2 of my literature review, a study conducted by Ibarra & Obodaru (2019), which via a 360-degree exercise evaluated 2,816 women in leadership, from 140 countries, found that women scored low on vision. Having a lack of vision is a barrier that may be jeopardizing women's career advancement and ability to lead organizations successfully. As such, being able to envision the future, and then bringing people together, as Victoria suggested, is a true and must have trait of a strong transformational leader.

Alike, Olivia believes that transformational leadership is about innovation, having "a big idea" and then working collaboratively with others to tackle it even if you don't eradicate the problem, it's an ongoing collaborative process. She stated:

So, I think leadership, what makes transformational leadership happen is one big idea. You come up with a big idea to solve, a problem, because it's all transformation, it's all about innovation. Ideas, and then the exchange of that, right. So, what I see happen in transformational leaders is they have the big idea. You work collaboratively with others to transform, to tackle whatever the problem is and then you look back and say, 'not did I solve it totally', because I don't know that we ever totally solve it, because transformation means we go to the next place, we get better, we fine-tune, we tweak again, and you just continue

that. It's an ongoing cycle. So, I think sometimes people think that if I'm going to be a transformational leader, I have to eradicate a problem altogether and maybe you will, maybe you won't, but transformative leaders innovate, find an issue, innovate, collaborate with people to solve it, and then can continue to tweak that over time because that's what makes it exciting.

Expanding on the importance of women in leadership roles having a vision "one big idea" and then bringing people together to execute, I will highlight that while lack of vision is perceived as a barrier (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2019), which based on Victoria's and Olivia's responses to my interview question is resolving, women are also known to have key skills deemed important in transformational leadership. Skills which include being effective listeners and communicators, facilitating collaboration and change while empowering others to align and follow (Paludi & Coates, 20110). As such, aspiring women or those already in senior leadership roles, should feel empowered to envision, collaborate and transform. The skills are there, and just like solving a big idea as Olivia indicated, sometimes they just need tweaking and fine-tuning to come out.

McKenzie indicated that being transformational is a combination of the vision for the business and the leadership approach on its implementation. For if a leader is needing to change the way the business is conducted, they need to be able to get other stakeholders onboard. As such, she suggested it's a skill senior leaders will need to have. She further suggested that in her field of finances it's this skillset you look for in future leaders. She stated: "They are not necessarily the best financial analyst, they're the change agents and those who are always trying to find the next possibility and find a way to get to where you need to get, to where you need to go or get to a 'yes' decision on something that is going to make a difference". She further stated:

I have to think it's all wrapped up together. I mean I know what we say when we talk about transformation at work right and that's generally a significant change right. We're going to transform; we're going to drive through a period of significant change and certainly dynamic leadership is required and inspirational leadership is required if you're to transform an organization. And when I think about leadership as a calling, leadership transformational, if you're in an environment that just needs to step up its game it's a different thing than if you're really trying to say out with the old in with the new and the new you're going to have 55% of the people in the old not wanting to get with you. There's an extent of that we face every day no matter what job you're in. Even if you're just trying to get your peers on, your team has changed the way they're thinking about something and it's something new. So, I think it's a skill you're going to have to have whether you're a senior leader trying to transform thinking in a boardroom full of stuck in their ways senior leaders, or a financial analyst with a team of five analyst who've always done something this way and you see the value of doing it this way going forward and how much more powerful you'll be as a team and what you can influence saving time, doing things more efficiently, making better decision and more productive. It's the same dynamic, it's the same skill; it's something you look for to know who your future leaders are.

Powell (2011) describes transformational leaders as those who motivate subordinates to transcend their own self-interest for the good of the group or organization. McKenzie, extended this description and indicated that transformational leadership is a must have skill if you are going to align not only your teams, but peers and board rooms filled with "stuck on their way senior leaders" to the vision at hand. To Powell's (2011) description, transformational leaders can indeed motivate subordinates and would have many tools to do so. Yet, transformational leadership becomes more so powerful if a leader is also able aligning peers, or other senior leaders who are accustomed to operating the business in a certain way to the new vision at hand. A skill many women in senior leadership roles have, and successfully execute.

Describing transformational leaders as a caterpillar tuning into a butterfly, Kate also believes that transformational leaders can establish a vision and then get others

behind it. In addition to that she believes that transformational leaders support people's growth allowing their best to come forward. She stated:

What do I think transformational leader is? You know, when you say that I imagine in my mind a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, right. Like really transformative...I feel like transformational leadership would be something that would really enable and support everybody's growth sort of to their greatest potential. And I do believe that we as a society are so quick to pigeonhole people and limit them just by definition you're just limited, put in a box right away. And I think transformational leadership would really be about allowing the best of every individual to come forth towards a goal, right. So, you have to have a leader who can articulate and establish a goal or vision for where they want to take an organization, a project or whatever and get people behind it, that the they know how to bring their best selves to it.

Establishing already the importance of transformational leaders having a vision and then getting people behind it, I will expand on Kate's first point, which is one that exudes transformational leadership and must be executed as it's about supporting the growth of others. Transformational leaders are not just about self-growth. They are about ensuring that those around them grow as well; a key trait I have found in women leaders. Using Kate's analogy of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly as transformational, it's quite rewarding for a leader to also watch how with their support their team grows and flourishes. How these individuals perhaps turn into transformational leaders themselves while along the way helping others meet their full potential. With this, the cycle of the caterpillar turning into a cocoon and then a butterfly continues.

Support People Growth and Evolving Mindset

Supporting people's growth by helping them meet their full potential and reach their dreams was viewed as an essential quality of a transformational leader by 33% of my study participants. From this, 25% of them added the importance of having an

evolving mindset, one that welcomes change. “It’s about possibility, it’s about not limiting yourself to what is or what has been. And you know, as I expressed of helping them get there even if you don’t know where there is. So transformational is getting somewhere where you couldn’t have imagined initially”, expressed Suellen. Alike, Elva believes that being a transformational leader is having the ability to change one’s mindset and allow people to dream and see a different horizon for themselves. She stated:

It is, as I said earlier, being a visionary. Driving, not just change, but changing a paradigm in one’s mindset, allowing people to dream and connect those dreams to reality. Allowing people to see a different horizon. Everybody can see the sky, but can they see a different horizon for themselves. Transformation is moving yourself from the rain in order to see a rainbow. Many people want the rainbow without the rain, it is impossible. So when you can have rain in your lives, challenges in your life, transformational leaders know how to get you around the mountain, through the mountain. However you go, a transformation leader will get you or themselves to the other side. There is no excuse to say ‘the mountain is too big, too high, too wide’ because I’m going to transform my own mind and my team’s mind. We are going to get through this together.

There have been many times when great ideas get lost as a result of not changing the paradigm in one’s mindset and allowing people to dream and helping them connect those dreams to reality, as Elva so eloquently elaborated. As such, transformational leaders lead in a way where they are overcoming barriers, transforming their environment and empowering others to do the same for themselves. In her role, many times these individuals themselves not realizing they can achieve. Yet, Elva carefully listening and opening their minds to the doors of possibility. These are the thoughts of a strong resilient women executing her senior leadership role successfully while elevating other women and men alike. Transformational leadership at its core and one that must be mirrored as we elevate other women!

Highlighting Michelle Obama book *The Coming*, Melina believes that transformational leaders are resilient and welcome change while empowering others to meet their “highest potential”. She stated:

Transformational is about the resilience. It’s about being flexible and acknowledging that we’re all becoming, right. When I think about Michelle Obama’s book, *The Coming*, it’s not we don’t ever just rise to this one place and that’s it, we’re done. We’re always evolving, we’re always changing, we’re always growing, and so I think a transformational leader is one that acknowledges and appreciates and welcomes change, and engenders and empowers and helps the people that are around them to get to their highest potential and help them to be their best selves and whatever that looks like. Whether it’s best on their team or not. That’s what I think is a transformational leader.

Resilience is a key trait successful women learn to exercise early on (Rimm, 1999) and to view transformational as resilient is at the core of how successful women lead. As such, just as Melina indicated, resilient transformational women are those that are facilitating change and empowering others. This thought process is in line with how other successful women define leadership and why many are reaching higher level roles at a more common rate (Paludi & Coates, 2011). In practicing this leadership approach, in addition to being transformational and staying true to themselves, by empowering others women are creating a domino effect that contributes to the investment of future female leaders. A must if we want to change the status quo and place more women in senior leadership roles.

Change Status Quo

Finally, not settling for the Status Quo was viewed as an essential quality of a transformational leader by 42% of my study participants. Eloquently expressed by Perla when I asked what she believed being transformational was, she indicated, “It means

looking at the world as it is. Imagining the world as it should be, and then taking action necessary to make it so". Viewing herself as this version of a transformational leader, Courtney believes that transformational leaders are those who are "not satisfied with the status quo and work on making improvements for the benefits of others. She stated:

I always thought of transformational leadership as you know, somebody who's not satisfied with the status quo. Who can't leave good enough alone, who just believes things, you know, continues improvement and that there's a lot to do that could be changed to make everybody's lives better, faster, cheaper, whatever the goal might be. So, I'm definitely that definition of a transformational leader.

In addition to Courtney's view of transformational leadership, individuals not satisfied with the status quo always ask why, 'why can't we change the process if it's beneficial to others?', why not?', or whatever the "why" question might be. In asking why, providing solutions to the issues at hand and with resilience and can-do attitude, moving solutions forward. This transformational leadership approach allows leaders to exercise their leadership voice, question inequities and bring needed changes to the culture at hand. As a result, both empowering the leader and contributing to positive organizational change.

Believing it's not enough to just sustain, Birgit emphasized that transformational leaders are values based, driven by excellence and driven by serving. Not necessarily aiming on making big changes, Alejandra viewed transformational leaders as those who "create enough momentum to shift things". She stated:

Well, initially when I think of transformational what comes to mind is something like big change, but actually think that to be transformational just to me means to create enough momentum to shift things. It does not need to be a change, but just being that fork in the road that sort of turns things to a different access.

Transformational leadership does not have to be about big changes. It can be about gradual, yet impactful and sustainable changes where leaders get enough momentum to implement. Gradual changes that can be the catalyst for the big changes. Then when the big changes have to take place, they can be managed gradually, over time. As Olivia indicated “It’s an ongoing cycle”, and Brianna suggested as well “it’s not incremental...but it’s chipping away”.

When it comes to changing the status quo, Brianna believes that it’s not change or transformation for the sake of it, but instead it’s changing the things that no longer serve the vision. She stated:

We can look at what we have done, and where we are and say ‘there are things we absolutely need to change and how can we be transformative’. It’s not incremental change when I think of transformation...but it’s chipping away at the edges. It’s saying we want to do this work that we do, but we’re intentionally going to improve...you’re going to shed the things that no longer serve the vision that you have.

Brianna brings up a significant point. There are things that absolutely need to change if they are no longer serving the vision and these changes can be gradual. However, in adding to this point, there are also perhaps things that are working and moving the vision forward. In this scenario change should not be implemented as it would not be transformational. On the contrary, it would be disruptive and jeopardizing to the vision at hand. Nonetheless, a transformational leader would recognize this and not place their organization in this scenario. If they did, then in that case they would be transactional leaders.

Research Question 3: Summary of Findings

Via the lived experiences of my 13 study participants, I moved to answer Research Question 3) *What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?*. In exploring how previous work experience contributed to the transformational leadership of women, as posed to my 13 study participants, to recap, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of the data were: 1) *Skills Learned Over Time*, 2) *People Network*, 3) *Organizational Knowledge* 4) *Prior Executive Experience* and 5) *Failure Leads to Success*. In exploring how life experiences contributed to the transformational leadership of women, as posed to 12 of my 13 study participants, to recap, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of the data in were: 1) *Childhood Experience*, 2) *People Network*, 3) *Prior Experiences* and 4) *Self-Realization*. In understanding what my 13 study participants viewed as transformational leadership, to recap, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of the data in were: 1) *Vision*, 2) *Align People on Vision*, 3) *Support People Growth*, 4) *Evolving Mindset* and 5) *Change Status Quo*.

Chapter IV Findings Conclusion

In this chapter I examined first-hand how women in senior leadership roles progressed through their careers. I looked at how women respond to challenges as they moved up the corporate ladder, the strengths and skills utilized to achieve senior leadership roles and the advice these senior leaders would provide other aspiring women in doing so. Finally, I captured the work and life experiences that have contributed to

women's transformational leadership approach and what women leaders viewed as transformation leadership.

Targeting women in senior leadership roles who successfully progressed through their careers and could offer career advice to other women, I composed my study participant population. My 13 study participants derived from diverse backgrounds and grew up in different socioeconomic settings. While all deriving from diverse settings and intersectionality being an evident factor, an examination of their upbringing confirmed that the support they received from their family, community and focus on education, contributed to the women leaders they are today. Holding senior leadership roles in the areas of government, private sector, non-profit and higher education administration, all study participants are thriving in their field.

Irrespective of their diverse background, socioeconomic setting growing up and chosen career field, as we dove deep into answering my three research questions 1) *What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?*, 2) *What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?*, and 3) *What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?*, similar themes arose for these senior women leaders. A recap of the findings is provided as follows:

In examining the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to attain senior leadership roles, the themes that arose from the study are: 1) *lack of confidence*, 2) *family responsibilities*, 3) *building a voice* and 4) *gender stereotypes*. Themes for advice provided on overcoming these challenges are: 1) *building people networks*, 2) *mentors*, 3)

own your power, 4) build your skills and 5) self-awareness. In examining the strengths and skill needed by women to attain senior leadership roles, the themes that arose are: 1) *building relationships and collaboration, 2) empowering teams, 3) developing hard skills, 4) good communication skills and 5) the use of soft skills.* In form of advice in the attainment of these skills the themes that arose are: 1) *courage, 2) people network, 3) volunteering and 4) seek feedback.* For work experience that contributed to women's attainment of senior leadership roles, the themes that arose are: 1) *skills learned over time, 2) people network, 3) organizational knowledge, 4) prior executive experience and 5) failure leads to success.* Themes that touch upon life experience that contributed to women's attainment of senior leadership roles are: 1) *childhood experiences, 2) people network, 3) prior experiences and 4) self-realization.* Finally, the themes that arose for what women viewed as transformational leadership are: 1) *vision, 2) align people on vision, 3) support people growth, 4) evolving mindset and 5) change status quo.* The following chapter will provide an analysis of the findings of this study and will present implications and recommendations that emerged as a result.

“The question isn't who's going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.”

~Ayn Rand~

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

Summary of Study

Women represent 57.1% of the US working population ([US Department of Labor](#)). From this working population, 40% of women hold positions in managerial or professional roles ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)). While women represent over half of the working population and have demonstrated success in management and professional positions, they continue to face barriers in attaining senior level leadership roles across multiple fields ([Fortune](#), 2019; [Pew Research Center](#), 2018; Seo, et al, 2017; Schwanke, 2013; Johns, 2013). Examining first-hand how women in senior leadership roles progressed through their careers, the purpose of this qualitative study was to look at the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field; the strengths and skills utilized and how work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles. Via the sharing of stories, the previous chapter offered the personal and professional thoughts of thirteen women in senior leader roles. This chapter will present a discussion of findings followed by conclusions gained. Based on the findings from this study recommendations will be made for future research and best practices to strengthen the pipeline and pave a smoother pathway for future female leaders in the workforce.

Summary of Findings

Drawing from over 65 pieces of scholarly work that span across a 100-year period, Chapter II documented the barrier's many women encounter as they navigate

their careers and aim to move up the corporate ladder. Barriers resulting from gender stereotypes ingrained in our society and present in corporate settings. In addition, family responsibilities and what is perceived as a women's lack of vision present as a barrier for women's career progression.

Targeting women in senior leadership roles who successfully progressed through their careers and could offer career advice to other women, I composed my study participant population. My 13 study participants derived from diverse backgrounds and grew up in different socioeconomic settings. Wanting to understand how early childhood experiences and education contributed to women's career progression the following series of general questions were asked of my study participants: *a) Could you tell me about your background and upbringing?, b) As a young girl, were you motivated/encouraged to meet your full potential?, c) Did you have an idol or someone you looked up to?, d) Could you describe your education and how it influenced you?, and e) Did you have a mentor as you advanced in your career?* (Appendix C). Findings presented in Chapter IV indicate that while all of the study participants derived from diverse socioeconomic settings and intersectionality was a factor for some, an examination of their upbringing confirmed that the support they received from their family, community and focus on education, contributed to the women leaders they are today. Holding senior leadership roles in the areas of government, private sector, non-profit and higher education administration, all study participants are thriving in their field. Study participant stories: *The Early Years*, are captures as Appendix G.

Chapter IV further confirmed that irrespective of their diverse backgrounds, socioeconomic setting growing up and chosen career field, as we dove deep into

answering my three research questions: 1) *What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?*, 2) *What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?*, and 3) *What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?*, all study participants experienced similar barriers as they navigated through their careers and utilized similar strengths and skills to achieve senior leadership roles in their field. Not surprisingly, the barriers identified by my study participants are aligned with the barriers many women encounter as they navigate their careers and aim to attain senior leadership roles as captured via my literature review findings. Study participants expressed similar life and work experiences that contributed to their attainment and successful execution of their senior leadership roles. In this scenario 58% of my study participants took me back to their early childhood experiences and drew how these had impact on them as leaders. This further strengthening my findings surrounding the early development of young girls and how this can contribute to the women leaders they are today as captured in Chapter IV.

Response to Research Questions

The following research and interview questions guided the research of this study:

Research Question 1

The first research question this study sought to answer was, *What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their*

field? To find the answer, the following interview questions were particularly meaningful:

- d) In order to achieve senior level leadership roles in your field, what are some of the challenges and barriers that women need to overcome?
- e) What were the challenges and barriers that were particularly significant for you?
- f) What can women who aspire to attain senior leadership roles in their field do to overcome these challenges and barriers?

Research Question 2

The second research question this study sought to answer was, *2) What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?* To find the answer, the following interview questions were particularly meaningful:

- d) What type of strengths and skills do women need in order to make it to senior level leadership roles?
- e) What skills or strengths were particularly important for you as you advanced in your career?
- f) How can women who aspire to take on leadership roles obtain these strengths and skills?

Research Question 3

The third research question this study sought to answer was, *3) What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?* To find the answer, the following interview questions were particularly meaningful:

- d) How did your previous work experiences help you in your current leadership role?
- e) What are some of your previous life experiences that have an impact on you as a leader?

f) In relation to leadership, what do you think being transformational is?

Discussion

In the following sections I present the findings highlighted in Chapter IV and which are in response to the guiding research questions.

Research Question 1) What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?

Barriers and Challenges

As I explored the barriers and challenges women must overcome in order to attain senior leadership roles in their field, the insights provided by my study participants revealed four themes: *1) women's lack of confidence, 2) gender stereotypes, 3) not building a voice and 4) family responsibilities*. From these themes, 61% of the participants viewed women's lack of confidence as a major barrier. Followed by gender stereotypes at 54%, not building a voice and exercising it at 38% and family responsibilities at 30%. These barriers as presented by my study participants are consistent with literature review findings which suggest they are inhibiting women's career progression and the attainment of senior leadership roles. In analyzing these barriers, I look to my theoretical framework; specifically focusing on *Social Feminist Theory* as it identifies the fundamental oppression of women in a patriarchal society. It offers lenses from which to understand the nature of gender inequities and examines women's and men's societal roles. This further allowed me to understand the challenges women face in attaining senior leadership roles via the sole purpose of being females in a

man-made world. However, the goal for social feminist as suggested by Napikoski (2021) is to work with men in order to attain a level playing field for both genders. This approach helping to provide opportunities for recommendations where both men and women are working together in the solution to these inequities. An approach where both men and women are viewed and treated like equals.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes were not highlighted by my study participants as the leading theme to the barriers women encounter in their career mobility and attainment of senior leadership roles. Instead, the leading theme that emerged in the analysis of the data was women's perceived lack of confidence, followed by gender stereotypes and women's struggle with building a leadership voice. I make the argument that resulting from gendered stereotypes ingrained in our culture which give women a lower social status in comparison to men and as a consequence, women not always viewed as leadership material, is what's eroding women's confidence. It's interjecting with women's struggle in build a leadership voice and raise their hand for what they need. In addition, women are socially condoned and their femininity comes into attach if they first don't take care of family responsibilities prior to pursuing career aspirations. This silent, but very real oppression of women is directly connected to gender stereotypes and the inequalities associated with being a woman in a man-made world. One that has created inequalities between women and men and which today are prevailing in the work setting. Therefore, for the purpose of this discussion and to highlight its consequences, I am placing gender stereotypes as the overarching theme. I'll then follow the discussion with the other themes that emerged and their connection to gender stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes structurally ingrained in our culture play a significant role in the challenges women encounter as they aim to access and attain senior leadership roles as suggested by my literature review findings (Schein, 2001; Fels, 2004; Singh and Terjesen, 2008; Eagly and Sczesny, 2009; McEldowney, et al., 2009; Powell, 2011; Ryan, et al., 2011; Johns, 2013; Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013; Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015; Northouse, 2016; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017; Kubu, 2017; Carnevale, et al., 2018; Aydin, 2020; Offerman and Foley, 2020). Many times, irrespective of women's academic advancements, gender stereotypes continuing to halt their career aspirations and attainment of senior leadership roles (Bass, et al., 1994; Oakley, 2000; McEldowney, et al., 2009; Johns, 2013; Schwanke, 2013; Seo, et al., 2017). Consistent with these findings, 54% of my study participants highlighted gender stereotypes as an overall barrier for women. Present as a challenge in their career progression and as they executed their senior leadership roles. Barriers connected to gender stereotypes and presented by my study participants included their ideas or contributions being discounted, or their competencies questioned. This is a common experiences for women in leadership roles where many times women need to defend their position, qualifications and expertise as leaders. Further, they experienced double standards in the way they exercised their leadership role and many times criticized for it in comparison to their male counterparts. If the women leaders were collaborative they were criticized and viewed as indecisive, incompetent or weak. If they were assertive, they were viewed as harsh or acting too masculine. If men are assertive, they are simply viewed as great leaders with no questions asked. This is a problem that many women encounter in the workforce, not only in their leadership roles, but as they aspire to attain them. In addition, if women speak as much as

men in a work setting, or compete for a high-level role, their femininity comes into attach. They are then viewed as unattractive, promiscuous or even seductive (Fells, 2004). In the previous chapter I expressed that “while fearing being viewed as ‘unattractive, promiscuous or even seductive’ can be interpreted as superficial by critics, in the workplace it is an oppressive approach closely aligned to harassment. A tactic that keeps many women silent, unable to express their true selves and showcase their talents and contributions”. I continue to stay firm on this belief and connect it to *Social Feminist Theory* as via this context I can argue that there is a deep connection between this ‘superficial’ attack to women and the oppression many women experience this very day! As such, no form of oppression should be dismissed as a dismissal in any shape is oppressive in itself. I further expressed that in this context it’s difficult for women who have attained senior leadership roles to be authentic, ambitious and even self-confident as they may be criticized for being too agentic and not holding communal qualities. If they exercise communal qualities, they are then criticized for not holding agentic qualities (Hopkins & Oneil; 2015; Aydin, 2020). These social expectations making it quite challenging for women shape their authentic leadership identity and answer the question of ‘who gets to be authentic?’. This leading to the perceived lack of confidence many women are experiences in the workplace and beyond.

Lack of Confidence

Consistent with my literature review findings (Ibarra, et al., 2013; Ely and Kolb, 2013; Sherman, 2013; Stevenson and Orr, 2017; Wardell, 2020), 61% of my study participants viewed having a lack of confidence as a major barrier for women’s career progression and further suggest it’s a barrier that many women unconsciously place on

themselves. Study participants placed this as a more alarming barrier in comparison to the persistent gender stereotypes women face as they aim to move up the corporate ladder. The perception that my study participants stand by is that women are much more questioning of their own abilities and suffer from more self-doubt in comparison to men. I find this perception to be very real and further make the argument that resulting from structural gendered stereotypes ingrained in our culture that give women a lower social status than men and don't view women as leadership material, is eroding women's confidence. This having a crippling effect as women themselves are not believing they have all the key attributes for senior leadership roles. These stereotypes being rooted so deep within our society that women themselves may "think manager-think male". By making this critical connection my intent is not to take away from the barriers women face as they navigate their careers and aim to attain senior leadership roles. Those barriers which are connected to women's perceived lack of confidence and which my study participants identified. It's important for aspiring women leaders to understand that lacking confidence can be a significant barrier to their career progression; as such, it must be addressed. My intent is however, to target one potential root cause to women's perceived lack of confidence so that the issue can be addressed. This is also the case for the struggles some women face in building a leadership voice. Which my study participants suggested is an area that is also affecting women's career aspirations and their credibility as leaders if not addressed.

Building a voice

There are other subtle barriers connected to women's perceived lack of confidence and gender stereotypes that women encounter as they navigate their careers

and seek to attain senior leadership roles. One of them is struggling with building a leadership voice, or not exercising their voice accordingly. Therefore, 38% of my study participants viewed the power of building one's voice, making themselves visible and heard as crucial in leadership and career progression. Having a voice, one that is heard, valued and respected is crucial to cultivate in any leadership role and can be the most powerful tool in a woman's leadership toolbox. A women's voice can be used to make themselves visible as they navigate their career and in the way they lead their team or influence others. There is a saying that 'silence can't be heard' and with silence opportunities can get lost. Therefore, a significant barrier for women wanting to attain senior leadership roles and then steer them is not having or owning their voice. This is closely aligned with the importance of constructing a leadership identity (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013; Kapasi, Sang & Sitko, 2016; Stevenson & Orr, 2017). Yet, reflecting back on gender stereotypes, a strong voice can also place a double standard on women as they can be viewed as emotional, angry, loud or uncooperative if their voice gets too uncomfortable for others. Or as Elva suggested, called the "B" word if they speak too much. Perhaps this being the reason many women stay silent and don't raise their hands for promotions (Lublin, 2016) or to ask for what they need. Yet, not exercising a voice leads to the perception that women in leadership lack vision (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2019) and ambition. This resulting in a negative domino effect to women's career progression and leadership contributions.

Family Responsibilities

Aligned with my literature review findings, which indicates that 51% of working women with children under the age of 18 found it hard to advance in their career due to

family responsibilities (Hein & Cassirer, 2010; Schwanke, 2013; [Pew Research Center](#); Lublin, 2016; Oschenfeld, 2017; Seo, et al., 2017; Carnevale, et al., 2018). Similarly, 30% of my study participants highlighted family responsibilities as a natural barrier for professional women. One of my study participants further sharing she had to travel for work just two weeks after giving birth to her child. This can be a common occurrence for women with young families and demanding careers. However, I'm hopeful this is now starting to be addressed with the [Family and Medical Leave Act \(FMLA\)](#) that was passed by congress on February 5, 1993. This act provides employees to use up to twelve (12) weeks of unpaid job protected leave for each calendar year. It can be used for the care of the employee's child (birth, placement for adoptions, or foster care). Non the less, even with this act in place, women with young families and demanding careers do experience the extra stress associated with these responsibilities. What's more, not all can afford to take 12 weeks of unpaid leave even if protected by law. In addition to the barriers associated with the miracle of childbirth, while some women may have supportive spouses as was the case for some of my study participants, studies suggest that women with families do 2/3 of the household work and hold major responsibilities for childcare and family needs (hooks, 2000; Babcock and Laschever, 2009; Carnevale et al., 2018). Furthermore, women are socially condoned and their femininity comes into attach if they first don't take care of family responsibilities (Fels, 2004). This became more so evident during the COVID pandemic where women found themselves caring for children, homeschooling them, while trying to manage their jobs. As such, it is critical to break the gender stereotypes and social expectations that keep women working longer hours, both at home and work as this is significantly contributing to women's burnout.

For women with families that want or have the financial need to grow in their careers and contribute outside of their home, many times because they are the sole provider, there is no option but to juggle between work and home. Equally demanding tasks to say the least! Yet, if not managed, women run the risk at keeping their careers stale or suffering financially. Studies have shown that women whom get pulled away from their careers due to family responsibilities are running the risk of not expanding on their human capital (Schwanke, 2013). In some cases, not having this human capital, which represents skills, experience and knowledge gained via regular employment, curtailing women's career opportunities and this leading to poverty (Budlender, 2011). On the other spectrum, women not having the option of having a family as they would have to put family on hold in order to manage their careers. This can jeopardize their ability to have a family as most women's prime time in their careers is also when their biological clock is clicking.

Research Question 2) What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?.

Strengths and Skills

Women face many barriers in the path to career advancement, yet research indicates that those who do advance in their careers and reach senior leadership roles have key attributes that allowed them to succeed in their field. These women have a strong academic background, mentors guiding them along the way, practice resilience, exercise their soft skills, are transformational and lead with authenticity. Most significantly they take ownership of their careers by making an identity shift that allows them to view themselves as leaders and move towards the path of their professional

goals. These are confident women that take risks and move barriers in spite of hearing “No” along the way (Rimm, 1999; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Coates, 2011; Ibarra, et al., 2013; Sandberg, 2013; Adler, 2015; Lublin, 2016; Stevenson & Orr, 2017; Abrams, 2019; Wardell, 2020). Research findings align with the perceptions presented by my 13 study participants on the strengths and skills women utilize to achieve senior leadership roles in their field. As I analyzed the data the recurring themes that stood out in some cases overlapped with how women responded to challenges overcome. These themes were: 1) *building relationships and collaboration*, 2) *empowering teams*, 3) *developing hard skills*, 4) *good communication skills* and 5) *the use of soft skills*. From this, 62% of the study participants viewed building relationships and collaboration as critical. Viewing empowering teams equally as important, 62% of study participants found this to be a must have skill for women in leadership roles. Followed by the use of soft skills at 54%, developing hard skills at 46% and good communication skills at 38%. These findings align closely with factors related to how women lead which contribute to an organization’s success. These factors being: women’s flexibility in leading, cultural acumen, relationship building and diplomatic nature. In addition, their transformational leadership style that incorporates an inclusive, trustworthy and humanistic approach; key soft skills that are sought after in the 21st century and which women are known to exhibit (Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Ayman & Korabik, 2015; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017). In analyzing these strengths I look to my theoretical framework; specifically focusing on *Transformational Leadership Theory* as it is part of the “New Leadership” paradigm, which gives more attention to the charismatic and effective elements of leadership. It changes and transforms people and is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards

and long-term goals. It further focuses on motivating subordinates while leaders transcend their own self-interest for the good of the group (Powell, 2011; Northouse, 2016). This is closely aligned with my study participant thought process and views on effective leadership.

Building Relationships and Collaboration

Building relationships and collaboration was an overall theme throughout the study. This is no coincidence as it aligns with women's relationship building as a leadership approach (Ayman & Korabik, 2015). This approach providing a foundation for effective leadership as it exudes the values of transformational leadership. In specifically answering research question two, 62% of my study participants, successful women in their field, expressed that for women to attain and be successful in senior leadership roles, collaboration and relationship building was imperative. This too is no coincidence for research has also found that successful women have defined leadership in terms of being effective listeners and communicators while facilitating collaboration. What is more, practicing these collaborative skills has resulted in more women reaching top levels of organizations at a more common rate (Paulidi & Coates, 2011), while organizations gaining more financial prosperity (Adler, 2015; Ayman & Korabik, 2015; Lublin, 2016; Seo, et al., 2017). Getting more women to top leadership has multiple benefits including providing more role models for high potential women who through natural collaboration would then lift others (Welburne, et al., 2007). A natural domino effect to women's attainment of senior leadership roles and a strong argument to make as we elevate women's to meet their career aspirations! As such, I can't over emphasize that we must create environments where women can build relationships and collaborate among others.

Where they can find allies and establish networks. In doing so, continue building on their leadership approach and with the support of others navigate the many barriers they encounter in their leadership journey.

Empowering Teams

Along these lines of collaboration and relationship building, 62% of my study participants found empowering teams to be key to leadership success. They further suggested that leaders must build high functioning teams that have more knowledge than they do. Where leaders can build from the teams' strengths yet develop areas of opportunity within them. However, to ensure success, leaders must have the ability to influence and inspire trust among them while empowering the team to meet their full potential. In accomplish this, my study participants suggested that leaders must create an environment that is inclusive of all different kinds of people in the organization and to be conscious of gender and the actions taken to ensure diversity. My study participants responses align with my literature review findings which suggest that in comparison to men, women leaders exhibit an inclusive humanistic approach. A skill key in building strong teams (Adler, 2015); a transformational approach that provides a positive impact on the teams' morale (Seo, et al., 2017).

Leaders are only as great as their team and to ensure success leaders must inspire trust and empower transparency. Upon successfully doing so leaders create a strong and collaborative team that ensures the smooth management of operations and vision execution. This approach, along with leading as an authentic and transformational leader ensures the engagement of staff and is key to an organization's success. Therefore, women in leadership roles should embraced the approach of collaboration and

partnership early in their careers. This is an area of leadership I can relate with as from the beginning of my career I knew that engaged staff is key to an organization's success. Therefore, I embraced the approach of empowering teams early on. While in one of my earlier leadership roles I was humbled to learn that in an organization wide staff engagement survey I received one of the highest scores by my staff. This was not only a humbling experience for me but set forward a further appreciation of my leadership approach. In an article following and titled *Great Manager Profile: Giselle Martin*, my leadership strengths were highlighted. At that time, and working under my direction, the department human resources manager was interviewed by the editor and asked what made me successful as a leader. The response was simple, yet the message very powerful. She indicated "There are lots of things beyond our specific jobs that need to get done...she creates an informal atmosphere where people come together as a team to help each other out." The Associate Dean of Administration and Finance for the organization, who was also interviewed in support of my leadership efforts, recognized my excellent people skills and the genuine care I have for my staff. This recognition solidified my authentic and transformational leadership approach while empowering others to follow! This approach has facilitated my ability to empower teams and help them meet their full potential, a crucial component of transformational leadership!

Exercising Soft Skills

Exercising soft skills in women's leadership approach was a dominating theme throughout the study. Research suggests that those critical soft skills that allow women to be transformational when leading have been deemed as an important approach to the path of career success and as a result of exercising those women are reaching top levels or

organizations at a more common rate (Rimm, 1999; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Paludi & Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). In line with this research, 54% of my study participants highlighted soft skills as a strength women utilized to achieve senior leadership roles in their field. This included exercising authenticity, operating with integrity, honesty, influencing others, being aggressive while staying true to their leadership style and having courage of their convictions. *Transformational Leadership Theory* suggests that these traits are found to be more congruent with women vs men as these traits are concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards and long-term goals. Where the leaders are more concerned in understanding their teams needs transcending their very own. In addition, having a leader mentality where women are able to look at the big picture. This is imperative to recognize as the ability for women to lead freely, authentically and in their own skin will further close the gap where society has deemed “think manager-think male” the prevalent leadership approach. As a result, open the doors for more aspiring women to pursue their career aspirations and for those that choose too, reach senior leadership roles.

Developing Hard Skills

For women in leadership roles there is a high degree of value placed on being an authentic and transformational leader. On exercising those sought out 21st century leadership skills that women tend to hold which are diplomatic in nature, have the power of build strong relationships and empower teams (Coates, 2011; Ayman and Korabik, 2015). Although the soft skills are important and define how women lead, there is no doubt that the development of hard skills is crucial for aspiring women’s career advancement and successful execution of their senior leadership roles. Making a strong

impact on this crucial requirement was a statement made by Courtney and which has been highlighted throughout this study. She stated: “Women can’t afford to take any shortcuts if they want to progress in their careers...in comparison to men, women need to have everything in their back pocket, the degrees, the certificates, the skills and experience”. The development of hard skills is indeed crucial and was emphasized by 38% of my study participants in the form of advice as an important method to overcome challenges. Similarly, in highlighting the strengths and skills women utilize to achieve senior leadership roles, 38% of my study participants stressed the importance of developing hard skills; those which are aligned to women’s career area of focus. There are several factors associated with this must requirement. Aside from women needing “everything in their back pocket” in order to progress through their careers, they also need to have a foundational knowledge base to be able to perform their core job and train others. In addition, study participants stressed that having this core skills and knowing your competence level allows leaders to project themselves in that way. In short, knowing the business and having the hard skills to back it up, adds to women’s credibility and ability to lead with confidence. As a result, for others to have the confidence in them to follow.

Communication Acumen

Strong communication skills or lack of, can set leaders apart. Leaders holding strong communication acumen are highly sought out and respected. While leaders suffering from poor communication skills can be deemed as incompetent. Therefore, in order for women to build a strong leadership identity, their communication skills must be mastered. Recognizing this, 38% of my study participants viewed effective

communication skills to be key for leadership success and tied to how others view the effectiveness of leaders. From my study participants perspective, having good communication skills included writing well, delivering the message clearly and even managing tone of voice. I'll add that good communication skills also include the way leaders present themselves in person and the confidence they exude via their posture and facial expressions. Strong communicators are able to present their vision and put their ideas forward in a convincing way. Taking into consideration that many times these stories are not the most popular as they may challenge the status quo, it's imperative for female leaders to properly express themselves. Not doing so being jeopardizing for women in senior leadership roles as their authority would be questioned and their skills deemed incompetent. Yet another example of the double standards placed on women resulting from gender stereotypes. As such, strong communication acumen is a must for aspiring women or those already in senior leadership roles to master.

Research Question 3) What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?.

Prior Work Experience

As I explored how prior work experiences contributed to my study participant's current senior leadership roles, the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of data were: 1) *skills gained over time*, 2) *people network*, 3) *organizational knowledge*, 4) *previous executive experience* and 5) *failure leading to success*. The overarching theme at 83%, was skills gained over time. This was followed by subcategories which include: people network at 42%, organizational knowledge and previous executive experience, equally at 25% and failure leading to success at 17%. Alike research question 1, in

analyzing prior work experiences, I looked to my theoretical framework; specifically focusing on *Social Feminist Theory* as it identifies the fundamental oppression of women in a patriarchal society. It offers lenses from which to understand the nature of gender inequities and examines women's and men's societal roles. This allowing me to understand what work/life experiences contributed to women attaining and succeeding in senior leadership roles while operating in the perspective of a man-made world.

Skills Gained Over Time

As my study participants reflected on what prior work experience contributed to their senior leadership roles, at 83% the overarching theme was skills gained overtime. Within this theme and at no surprise, 42% of my study participants reflected once again on the importance of people network and 25% highlighted on the importance of organizational knowledge. The importance of people networks has been established via as such, I'll focus on the latter. I concur with my study participants view on organizational knowledge and here is why; the ideal approach for women who advance in their careers is to do it gradually, yet at a steady pace. This approach allows them to build a solid foundation of their human capital as they gain skills over time. This gradual, yet steady approach allowing women to build the confidence needed to take on more responsibility and to be noticed or recommended for promotional opportunities by their people network. It's just as important however, to have a big picture understanding of the organization as a whole. Knowing how the broader organization works is imperative of senior leaders as this knowledge allows them to be strategic in their leadership approach and contributes to moving the vision forward. As such, the advice I would give aspiring women, as was also the advice given by my study participant's, is that they make an

investment on their human capital. One which is aligned to their career aspirations and their field of interest. To gain the needed human capital it is imperative to transition to different roles and not stay stagnant in one place. This is especially important in the early years when a woman's career is forming. Gaining these foundational skills would allow aspiring women to be more competitive; this resulting in the advancement of their careers and along the way the expansion of their people networks while learning about organizational politics. All imperative points that must not be undermined as these calculated moves will support women in their career aspirations and attainment of senior leadership roles. In addition, while ensuring it is done in a gradual approach that sets them up for success and not the glass cliff of failure.

Prior Executive Experience

While the focus of this section was to highlight that 25% of my study participants viewed prior executive experience as important in preparing them for their current senior leadership roles, and it absolutely is. Similar to skills gained over time, prior executive experience can expand a woman's human capital, yet in this case at the executive level. This elevated exposure preparing them to more smoothly take on a senior level leadership role with increasing demanding responsibilities. However, in my analysis of the data, I made an important observation that aligns with my literature review findings and imperative to address. Two of my study participants shared that their first executive role was as a result of being "thrust" into the role without necessarily being asked or feeling like they were "being thrown into the lion's den" of a crumbling organization. As captured via my literature review findings, studies have shown that women are more likely than men to be promoted into leadership positions associated with greater risks or

disapproval. A term referred to as the “glass cliff” (Northouse, 2016) and which was the case for these two senior leaders. In this instance, instead of exercising the “think manager-think male” approach (Schein, 2001; Powell, 2011) where a man would get promoted into the risky role, the “think crisis-think female” (Haslam, et. al., 2011) is put into place and instead a woman is appointed into the risky role. However, I also have to address that after having the experience of “being thrown into the lion’s den” or “thrust” into the role, with these being such difficult leadership roles as expressed by my study participants, they further expressed that the gained experience absolutely prepared them for their current senior leadership roles. These two stories are perfect examples on how aspiring women can be thrown into the “glass cliff” of failure. While failure can lead to success as also highlighted by my study participants, in scenarios where women are thrown into difficult positions, it can also have a damaging effect if women don’t prevail.

Failure Leads to Success

Our culture has taught us that failure comes with a negative connotation. It views those that fail as lacking ambition, knowledge or perhaps spunk. The [Oxford Dictionary](#) defines failure as “lack of success”, “a lack or deficiency of a desirable quality”, “an unsuccessful person, enterprise, or thing” among other negative connotations. Yet, failure is inevitable no matter how much preparation an individual may have. Nonetheless, given its negative connotation as I noted earlier it can have damaging effects specifically on women if they don’t prevail and move past failure. This is critical for women as they are positioned in more challenging positions that can lead to failure in comparison to men. This placing women in a vulnerable position as a result. Yet, in the bigger scheme failures are lessons, learning opportunities which can lead to success and strengthen

women's professional experience. Therefore, we must view failure as an integral part of our journey that can lead to success. My study participants are cognizant of this. As such, 17% of viewed failures as an imperative lesson that prepared them for their current senior leadership role. Their thought process was once you fail, you are never afraid of failure because you survive. While I've highlighted the "glass cliff" of failure and "think crisis-think female" phenomenon, as risky situations for aspirin women wanting to attain senior leadership roles (Haslam, et. al., 2011; Northouse, 2016); it's also important to highlight those ambitious, resilient women whom during a time of ambiguity are willing to take on high-risk positions even though they may lead to failure as these prospects open the doors of career advancement (Stevenson & Orr, 2017; Hurley & Chaudhary, 2016). As such, the task is to take calculated risks, embrace failure, and in the words of Abrams (2019) "fail forward".

Life Experience

As I explored how previous life experiences impacted my study participants as leaders the recurring themes that stood out in the analysis of data were: early childhood experiences, people network, prior career experiences and self-realization. The overarching theme at 58% went back to early childhood experiences. This was followed by people network at 25% and prior experience equally at 17%. Self-realization was highlighted at 8%. While all life experiences presented are equally important and had meaningful impact to my study participant's senior leadership roles, I'm going to focus on childhood experiences and self-realization given the positive impact these could have for future women leaders. In analyzing life experiences and how these impacted my study participants as leaders, I look to my theoretical framework. I focus on *Transformational*

Leadership Theory as it gives attention to soft skills; those which are naturally aligned to how women lead. Making this connection to the natural female leadership approach which research suggests is sought out in 21st century leadership, allows me to further advocate we raise our daughters to be confident young girls while staying true to themselves as women. I also look to: *Social Feminist Theory* as it identifies the fundamental oppression of women in a patriarchal society. It offers lenses from which to understand the nature of gender inequities and examines women's and men's societal roles. This theoretical lens further permitted me to understand the nature of women's self-doubt and how it can be connected to the gender inequities women face while operating in a man-made world.

Childhood Experiences

As I wrapped up the interviews with my study participants I went back to where we started, their life experiences and touched on how these contributed to the leaders they are today. At 58% my study participants took me back to their early childhood experiences and once again drew on how these have had a positive impact on them as leaders (participant stories captured as Appendix G: *The Early Years: Her Story*). As a recap, research shows that learning and development of young girls starts at a young age. Values from their culture and family are pre-conditioning girls and as a result affecting women career choices (Rimm, 1999). As such, to contribute to the career success of women it's imperative we start grooming them early in life, as young girls. It is not surprising that 58% of my study participants, these successful women leaders, went back to their childhood years and highlighted the skills they learned then as contributing factors to the leaders they are today. It's imperative that I highlight this finding to

reemphasize the importance of grooming girls from a young age as this helps shape their future and prepares them for career success. For those that choose to, the attainment of senior leadership roles. As such, it is imperative that we raise our daughters to be confident, brave, authentic and transformational women. Reassure them that the leadership characteristics that are gender-stereotyped as female don't necessarily interfere with career success. On the contrary, they should embrace these characteristics to benefit their careers and exercise those critical "soft skills" associated with listening, communicating effectively and with emotional intelligence that women tend to possess when leading. Exercising authenticity and those critical soft skills that allow women to be transformational when leading has been deemed an important approach to the path of career success (Rimm, 1999; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Paludi & Coates, 2011; Adler, 2015; Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). Therefore, we must ensure this is a norm in our society as this will further contribute to women's authenticity in leading and the self-realization that they can indeed succeed in whichever career field they choose in spite of the many barriers they will face along the way.

Self-Realization

Self-realization was not a theme that the majority of my study participants touched upon, with only one participant highlighting it as a pivotal point in her career. However, it is imperative to incorporate in the discussion as it aligns with the internal barriers many women face and which are associated with having a lack of confidence, self-doubt, including suffering from the impostor syndrome. Recognizing that the nature of this self-doubt can be connected to the gender inequities women face while operating in a man-made world as suggested by the *Social Feminist Theory*, these barriers while

internal and irrespective of where they derive from, do interfere with women's career progression. Therefore, the point of self-realization is imperative to address. To highlight how these internal barriers align with self-realization I'll recap on Olivia's story. She shared that self-realization was a pivotal point in her career because it was not until that point where she realized she had achieved success in her career. This was irrespective to the fact that before she had this self-realization, she was running a successful \$20M a year consulting firm and impactful in different parts of the world. The self-realization Olivia experienced aligns with an identity shift that must take place as women achieve senior leadership roles. There is much more entailed to becoming a leader than being put into the role, taking on more responsibility, acquiring and mastering new skills. It requires an internal shift in thinking where the leader has the realization that they have indeed arrived and are succeeding in their careers (Ibarra, et. al., 2013). Therefore, it is critical for women that have attained senior leadership roles to make this identity shift as not doing so can be detrimental to the successful execution of their role. As an added consequence, not allowing women leaders to be transformational, authentic or inspire trust in others to follow. For those ambitious women who do make an identity shift early on in their careers, this self-realization perhaps empowering them to seek career advancement and succeed in senior leadership roles in spite of the barriers they will encounter along the way.

Transformational Leaders

Transformational leadership is a new leadership concept which focuses more on the charismatic and effective elements of leadership. It is a process that transforms people and motivates teams to transcend their own self-interest for the good of the group or

organization (Powell, 2011). Transformational leadership is connected to emotions, values, ethics, standards and long-term goals (Northouse, 2016). In addition, it is viewed as more compatible with a feminine leadership approach (Powell, 2011). Using *Transformational Leadership Theory* as my theoretical framework I aimed to understand what my study participants viewed as essential qualities of a transformational leader. Therefore, I asked them what they thought being transformational was in leadership. The overarching theme at 50%, was being a visionary and from this, 33% of them added that to execute the vision transformational leaders aligned people on that vision. Supporting people's growth was viewed as an essential quality of a transformational leader by 33% of my study participants and from this, 25% of them believed that transformational leaders also have an evolving mindset. Standing as its own category, at 42% of my study participants believe that transformational leaders don't settle for the status quo.

Vision and Align People on Vision

Being the strong women leaders they are, it was no surprise that my study participants tied transformational leadership to supporting people's growth and getting people to align to their vision. While research already highlights women leaders as people oriented and this being imperative to their leadership approach, connecting transformational leadership to vision is an imperative leadership approach for women in senior leadership roles. As such, I would like to focus the discussion on this connection because having a lack of vision is viewed as a barrier for aspiring women. This assumption either blocking their career advancement, or for those already in senior leadership roles, their capabilities as leaders are questioned. A study conducted by Ibarra & Obodaru (2019), found that women in leadership scored low on vision. Having a lack

of vision or the presumption of such, is a barrier that may be jeopardizing women's career advancement and ability to lead organizations successfully. As such, being able to envision the future, and then bringing people together to accomplish that vision is a valuable trait of a strong transformational leader to have. I was elated to learn from my study participants that they viewed vision and the alignment of people on to that vision, as a transformational leadership trait. More than feeling elated, I was placed in a unique position to capture this information and eradicate the assumption that women are not visionaries because indeed they are! That perhaps some women are simply not expressing their vision due to lack of confidence or ability to build their leadership voice. Or perhaps they are not provided a platform to do so. Regardless of the circumstances, similar to building confidence and a leadership voice, the "perception" of women lacking vision must be addressed. If not done so, this too having negative effects on their career progression. Therefore, I ask women to carefully consider their vision and through transformational leadership, align others to support it. To rely on their people network, share their vision and create a plan for execution. I appeal to women that as challenging as it could be, they don't allow gender stereotypes to dim their light. For the rest of us, senior leaders, men and women alike, already making their vision known, I ask that as part of our vision we provide a safe platform where aspiring women can thrive!

Support People Growth and Evolving Mindset

Expanding on the importance of women in leadership roles having a vision and then bringing people together to execute, I will highlight that while a lack of vision is perceived as a barrier (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2019) that must be addressed, women are also known to have key skills deemed important in transformational leadership. Skills which

include being effective listeners and communicators, facilitating collaboration and change, while empowering others to align and follow (Paludi & Coates, 2010). As such, aspiring women or those already in senior leadership roles should feel empowered to envision, collaborate and transform. In doing so, they should be comfortable in exercising their authentic transformational leadership skills which come natural to many. To align others on to this vision and then its execution. While executing their vision they should listen to the vision of others and support their growth. True transformational leadership is not just about the self-it's also about others. As women move up the corporate ladder, look back and think of the people network that helped them along the way, they should pay a forward and lift others. Career success is not just about one individual thriving, it's also about supporting those that want to follow. A transformational leader is in tune with the needs of their team and their professional desires. They have an evolving mindset and don't feel threatened by the success of those that follow. Instead, they lend the tools needed for growth and lift as they climb. This is transformational leadership at its essence!

Change Status Quo

As women aim to transform, they should not settle for the status quo as this too was deemed important by my study participants. They should not leave good enough alone and always strive to make positive impact. Change does not always have to be big. It can be gradual, yet at a steady pace for transformation is an ongoing cycle. Nonetheless, leaders should not transform just for the purpose of transforming. Transformation should take place where it's needed and as the vision is no longer meeting the mission. Otherwise, it can be disruptive to those in the line of work

implementing the vision. Therefore, as leaders think about changing the status quo, and then align people to help make that change, they must take into serious consideration the time and effort it takes to do so. Not necessarily their time and effort, but that of those doing the heavy lifting. Leaders must think of what this transformation means to the teams doing the work. There are many times that leaders have the best of intentions and put forward plans to change the status quo. Yet, in doing so they must step back to consider what this means to the teams executing this change. Does it mean longer work hours? Does it mean recreating the wheel while creating conflict along the way? Will the change deteriorate the team's morale? Or is this change going to be beneficial and create better working situations for all involved? There are many scenarios to carefully consider. Whatever the situation is, transformational leaders think of these scenarios and strategically move forward in a form that will successfully change the status quo, while benefit all involved.

“The greatest discovery of all time is that a person can change his future by merely changing his attitude.” ~Oprah Winfrey~

Conclusion

Barriers, Challenges and Recommendations

There are many barriers that inhibit aspiring women's career progression. Barriers associated with structural and societal gender stereotypes ingrained in our culture and connected to patriarchal views that regardless of a woman's experience, education or abilities, fosters the perception that women are less qualified and less competent than men. This perception deeming women less capable to master senior leadership roles and

instead associating good leadership with the “think-male think-manager” phenomenon. This being irrespective of the organizational benefits associated with having qualified well-educated women at the realm. Yet, at the other extreme, when organizations are performing poorly the “think-crisis think-female” phenomenon is put into effect. In this instance women are more likely than men to be promoted into senior leadership roles that are associated with greater risk and criticism. Gender stereotypes have further consequences as societal expectations place greater family responsibilities on women in comparison to men and if these family responsibilities are not met, women’s femininity is put into attack. This representing a subtle form of oppression that keeps the needs of women repressed and their voice silent. In addition, placing them at a disadvantage by diminishing their access and attainment of human capital, key skills needed for career progression. This amalgamation of barriers creating the “glass ceiling” for many aspiring women. One that curtails their access and attainment of senior leadership roles. For those women who have attained senior leadership roles, experiencing the repercussions of double standards where women have to constantly prove themselves, their skills and their leadership authority. These barriers are grave and should not be ignored for keeping them in place we run the risk of viewing patriarchy as a societal norm. As such, practices must be established and exercised in order to curtail inequitable structures. Practices that not only lean on women as individuals to address, but also place the responsibility at the organizational and societal level. Where aspiring women are provided with resources that would help them build their human capital and establish people networks as these have been deemed important for career advancement. Where they are provided a safe platform to raise their hand and build a leadership voice. All of these efforts contributing to the

strengthening of their confidence and authentic leadership style. Practices where our community as a whole is educated on existing structural and societal gender stereotypes and the negative impact these have on women's access. Where tools for curtailment are provide, adherence is expected, and support of others is rewarded. Where both genders work like equals and have the freedom to lead authentically and as transformational leaders. This opening the doors for future generations of women leaders to come.

Strengths, Skills and Need for Future Research

There is much work to be done in addressing the many barriers' women face in the access and attainment of senior leadership roles. This must be acknowledged and continuously reemphasized! However, just as there is work to be done in addressing the barriers, light must also be shined on the stories for those women that have prevailed. Irrespective of the barriers women encounter as they navigate their careers, there are also many women who have navigated them. These are women that have taken ownership of their careers, have attained senior leadership roles and execute them successfully. These are resilient, transformational women that exercise their soft skills and lead with authenticity. Strong confident women that take risks and move barriers in spite of hearing "No" along the way. Women that in their leadership approach value the insights of others while empowering them to meet their full potential. These are inspirational leaders that understand the importance of elevating their voice and the voices of those that surround them. Most significantly, these are women who were once little girls that learned from their family and community they could accomplish anything they set their minds to. This light is not intended to hide or belittle the challenges women are susceptible to as they navigate their careers. On the contrary, it's to uplift women who are paving the road for

others and by doing so, contributing to the curtailment of these very challenges. It's critical that along these lines, more research be conducted on the strengths and skills women utilize to attain and succeed in these roles. This combination of efforts creating roadmaps for aspiring women. Roadmaps that will be: *1) ingrained in our culture, 2) help educate our communities, 3) create allies to the cause, and 4) contribute to the formation of equitable structures in our society.* Ultimately, these collective efforts generating the momentum that leaders, men and women alike, should lift as they climb even if this means elevating one woman at a time. In addition, we need to continue looking at how the early development of young girls is impacting their career choices as they reach adulthood. This as a result allowing them to be financially independent women that can indeed thrive in their chosen field. In this study I highlighted how early childhood development positively impacted 13 study participants who are confident, intelligent and well-respected female leaders thriving in the areas of: government, private sector, non-profit and higher education administration. However, as I reflect on their accomplishments, I ask myself how many young girls are missing out. How many young girls are not being groomed from an early age and told they can accomplish anything they set their mind to? I ask myself how many women CEO's, Vice Presidents, Presidents, Doctors, Scientist, Attorneys, and women in Senior Leadership Roles we will miss out on as a result? With further research on these topics: *1) barriers and challenges women face as they navigate their career, 2) strengths and skills women utilize to navigate their careers, and 3) early childhood grooming of young girls in preparation for their future,* we will continue elevating women and opening the doors of prosperity for future generations of women to come. Our sisters, daughters, nieces and granddaughters!

“tu puedes mujer, camina con tu frente alta y ser chingona!”

~Giselle Flores Martin~

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Appendix A: Participant Invitation Letter

Dear XXX,

My name is Giselle F. Martin and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education, Department of Organization and Leadership at the University of San Francisco. It is with great excitement that I embark on my dissertation that explores women in senior leadership roles; their career mobility, challenges and success stories.

Women represent a significant number of the working population, with 57.1% (approximately 66 million women), captured in 2018 by the [US Department of Labor](#). From this working population, 40% of women held positions in managerial or professional roles ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)). However, although women represent over half of the working population and have demonstrated success in management and professional positions, they continue to face challenges in attaining senior level leadership roles across multiple fields.

To gather data for my study I aim to interview 8-10 women that are in senior level leadership roles. The criteria for the selection of participants will be defined as those whose job responsibilities include at least one of the following:

- The senior leader has authority over an organization or large unit within, that includes the management of at least five professional employees.
- The senior leader provides budget oversight, strategic leadership and management of administrative, operational or financial functions, exercising delegated authority policy and programmatic decisions.
- The senior leader achieves organizational goals through managerial staff and in general have multiple levels of professional staff reporting to the role.

Women junior in their careers or in entry level roles will not be selected to participate in this study.

I am aware of your (*study participant background*). I hope you agree that your participation in this study will provide insights to women who aspire to advance to senior leadership roles and I would be honored if you would participate in my study.

Could I ask you for some time out of your busy schedule to allow me to conduct an interview with you? I would sincerely appreciate your contribution as I understand how precious your time is. I look forward to hearing from you at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Giselle F. Martin

Appendix B: Participant Follow-up

Dear xxx,

I am writing to follow up on my previous email inviting you to participate in my study on women in senior leadership roles; their career mobility, challenges, success stories and need for future research.

To gather data for my study I aim to interview 8-10 women that are in senior level leadership roles. The criteria for the selection of participants will be defined as those whose job responsibilities include at least one of the following:

- The senior leader has authority over an organization or large unit within, that includes the management of at least five professional employees.
- The senior leader provides budget oversight, strategic leadership and management of administrative, operational or financial functions, exercising delegated authority policy and programmatic decisions.
- The senior leader achieves organizational goals through managerial staff and in general have multiple levels of professional staff reporting to the role.

I am aware of your (*study participant background*). I hope you agree that your participation in this study will provide insights to women who aspire to advance to senior leadership roles and I would be honored if you would participate in my study.

Could I ask you for some time out of your busy schedule to allow me to conduct an interview with you? I would sincerely appreciate your contribution as I understand how precious your time is. I look forward to hearing from you at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Giselle F. Martin

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Women in Senior Leadership Roles: Career Mobility, Challenges, Success Stories and Need for Future Research

A semi-structured interview approach will be used for the interview process as this will allow the study participants to bring up new ideas during the interview process. As such, these questions represent an outline of what will be asked, but there is a possibility to expand further.

1) General Questions to capture study participant background:

- a) Could you tell me about your background and upbringing?
- b) As a young girl, were you motivated/encouraged to meet your full potential?
- c) Did you have an idol or someone you looked up to?
- d) Could you describe your education and how it influenced you?
- e) Did you have a mentor as you advanced in your career?

2) What were the challenges and barriers overcome by women in order to achieve senior leadership roles in their field?

- g) In order to achieve senior level leadership roles in your field, what are some of the challenges and barriers that women need to overcome?
- h) What were the challenges and barriers that were particularly significant for you?
- i) What can women who aspire to attain senior leadership roles in their field do to overcome these challenges and barriers?

3) What were the strengths and skills women utilized to achieve a senior level leadership role in their field?

- g) What type of strengths and skills do women need in order to make it to senior level leadership roles?
- h) What skills or strengths were particularly important for you as you advanced in your career?
- i) How can women who aspire to take on leadership roles obtain these strengths and skills?

4) What work/life experiences contributed to the transformational-leadership of women in senior level leadership roles in their field?

- g) How did your previous work experiences help you in your current leadership role?
- h) What are some of your previous life experiences that have an impact on you as a leader?
- i) How do your life experiences contribute to your leadership?
- j) In relation to leadership, what do you think being transformational is?



CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Appendix D: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study entitled Women in Senior Leadership Roles Career Mobility, Challenges, Success Stories and Need for Future Research conducted by Giselle F. Martin, a doctoral student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. The faculty supervisor for this study is Ursula Aldana, Ph.D, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the School of Education at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

According to the [US Department of Labor](#), in 2018 women represented a significant number of the working population: 57.1% (approximately 66 million women). From this working population, 40% of women held positions in managerial or professional roles. However, these numbers are not illustrative in senior level leadership roles across multiple fields. In this same year, only 6.6% of women held CEO positions in fortune 500 companies. Women in senior leadership roles representation was similar in other fields, with 22.2% noted as Fortune 500 board members, 25% US Senators, 23.4% US House, 28.6% State Legislative, 18% Governors, 26.1% Cabinet-level positions and in education 30.1% US college presidents were women. Literature review suggest that in the vast majority of cases the roadblocks women face as they aim for career advancement are connected to structural and societal gender stereotypes.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to look at how women respond to these challenges as they aim to move up the corporate ladder. Determine the elements that influence women's career success, with each of my study subjects expanding on their own definition of success. By documenting the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles that address challenges and highlight successes as they navigate their careers, my hope is to explore how their narratives could inform best practices to strengthen the pipeline and pave a smoother pathway for future female leaders in the workforce.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen: I will meet with you for 60-90 minutes via a secure Zoom session. Using a formal semi-structured interview approach, I will ask you a series of open-ended questions that I provided you with two weeks in advance via e-mail. The series of open-ended questions (Appendix C) utilized in this study were specifically developed to capture information from you to help me address my study research questions and provide narratives based on study participants lived experiences. I will record the conversation using Zoom recording. The recording will help me to 1) write a summary of our interview and 2) transcribe the interview. I will store the recording on my personal computer. I will not share it with anyone and will destroy the recording and any notes I take, or CV's and bios I collect, when I am finished

conducting my data analysis (anticipated June, 2022). Your name will not be shared or included in the analysis at any time and your full response will be kept completely confidential.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve one meeting session lasting 60-90 minutes. Due to recent COVID challenges the interviews will be over Zoom, this offering meeting flexibility while operating in a space of safety for you as the participant, and me as the researcher.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: We do not anticipate any risks or discomforts to you from participating in this research other than the potential vulnerability of sharing honest thoughts with me. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include a unique opportunity to document the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles, such as yourself. Experiences that address the challenges and highlight successes, that women may face as women navigate their careers. My hope is to explore how participant narratives could inform best practices to strengthen the pipeline and pave a smoother pathway for future female leaders in the workforce.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Because you will not be providing any information that can uniquely identify you (such as your name or student ID number), the data you provide will be anonymous.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Ursula Aldana, PhD at 415-422-5891 or ualdana@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE

Appendix E: IRBPHS Approval

Attachments:

- Expedited Review Approved by Chair - IRB ID: 1622.pdf



IRBPHS - Approval Notification

To: Giselle Martin
From: Richard Gregory Johnson III, IRB Chair
Subject: Protocol #1622
Date: 09/07/2021

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your research (IRB Protocol #1622) with the project title **Women in Senior Leadership Roles: Career Mobility, Challenges, Success Stories and Need for Future Research** has been approved by the IRB Chair under the rules for expedited review on **09/07/2021**.

Any modifications, adverse reactions or complications must be reported using a modification application to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS via email at IRBPHS@usfca.edu. Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson III
Professor & Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
University of San Francisco
irbphs@usfca.edu
[IRBPHS Website](#)

Appendix F: Breakdown Charts of Themes

Challenges and Barriers Overcome

<i>Senior Leaders</i>	<i>Lack of Confidence</i>	<i>Gender Stereotypes</i>	<i>Building a Voice</i>	<i>Family Responsibility</i>
Senior Leader 1		x		
Senior Leader 2	x			x
Senior Leader 3	x	x	x	
Senior Leader 4	x			
Senior Leader 5		x		x
Senior Leader 6		x		x
Senior Leader 7		x	x	x
Senior Leader 8	x		x	
Senior Leader 9	x			
Senior Leader 10	x	x	x	
Senior Leader 11			x	
Senior Leader 12	x			
Senior Leader 13	x	x		
Percentage	61%	54%	38%	30%

Advice

<i>Senior Leaders</i>	<i>People Networks</i>	<i>Own Your Power</i>	<i>Build Skills</i>	<i>Self Awareness</i>
Senior Leader 1		x		
Senior Leader 2	x			
Senior Leader 3				
Senior Leader 4	x		x	
Senior Leader 5		x	x	
Senior Leader 6		x		x
Senior Leader 7		x		x
Senior Leader 8	x	x		x
Senior Leader 9	x		x	x
Senior Leader 10		x		
Senior Leader 11	x		x	
Senior Leader 12	x	x	x	
Senior Leader 13	x			
Percentage	54%	54%	38%	30%

Strengths and Skills

<i>Senior Leaders</i>	<i>Relationships</i>	<i>Empower Team</i>	<i>Soft Skills</i>	<i>Hard Skills</i>	<i>Communication</i>
Senior Leader 1	x	x	x		x
Senior Leader 2				x	x
Senior Leader 3	x			x	
Senior Leader 4	x			x	
Senior Leader 5					
Senior Leader 6	x	x		x	
Senior Leader 7		x	x		
Senior Leader 8	x	x			
Senior Leader 9	x	x	x	x	x
Senior Leader 10		x	x		
Senior Leader 11	x	x	x		x
Senior Leader 12	x		x		x
Senior Leader 13		x	x	x	
Percentage	62%	62%	54%	46%	38%

Advice

<i>Senior Leaders</i>	<i>Courage</i>	<i>People Network</i>	<i>Volunteer</i>	<i>Seek Feedback</i>
Senior Leader 1	x		x	
Senior Leader 2	x			x
Senior Leader 3		x		
Senior Leader 4	x		x	
Senior Leader 5		x		
Senior Leader 6	x			
Senior Leader 7			x	
Senior Leader 8	x			
Senior Leader 9				x
Senior Leader 10	x	x		
Senior Leader 11		x		
Senior Leader 12	x			
Senior Leader 13	x			
Percentage	62%	31%	23%	15%

Work Experience

<i>Senior Leaders</i>	<i>Skills Over Time</i>	<i>People Network</i>	<i>Org Knowledge</i>	<i>Executive Exp</i>	<i>Failure</i>
Senior Leader 1	x		x		
Senior Leader 2					
Senior Leader 3	x	x			
Senior Leader 4	x	x	x		
Senior Leader 5	x	x			
Senior Leader 6	x		x		
Senior Leader 7	x			x	x
Senior Leader 8					
Senior Leader 9	x	x		x	
Senior Leader 10	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Senior Leader 11	x	x			
Senior Leader 12	x				x
Senior Leader 13	x			x	
Percentage	83%	42%	25%	25%	17%

Life Experience

<i>Senior Leaders</i>	<i>Childhood Experience</i>	<i>People Network</i>	<i>Prior Experiences</i>	<i>Self-Realization</i>
Senior Leader 1	x			
Senior Leader 2		x		
Senior Leader 3		x		
Senior Leader 4				x
Senior Leader 5	x			
Senior Leader 6	x			
Senior Leader 7			x	
Senior Leader 8	x			
Senior Leader 9	x			
Senior Leader 10	NA	NA	NA	NA
Senior Leader 11		x	x	
Senior Leader 12	x			
Senior Leader 13	x			
Percentage	58%	25%	17%	8%

Transformational Leadership

<i>Senior Leaders</i>	<i>Vision</i>	<i>Align People on Vision</i>	<i>Support People Growth</i>	<i>Evolving Mindset</i>	<i>Change Status Quo</i>
Senior Leader 1	x-->	x-->	x		
Senior Leader 2					x
Senior Leader 3					x
Senior Leader 4	x-->	x			
Senior Leader 5					x
Senior Leader 6	x-->	x			
Senior Leader 7	x-->	x			
Senior Leader 8					x
Senior Leader 9					x
Senior Leader 10	x-->		x-->	x	
Senior Leader 11	x				
Senior Leader 12			x-->	x	
Senior Leader 13			x-->	x	
Percentage	50%	33%	33%	25%	42%

Appendix G: The Early Years: Her Story

The following narratives highlight key elements from participant stories regarding formative experiences in their early years. These narratives center within individual participants, and were chosen because they capture examples on how values from their culture and family, pre-conditioned them to be the confident women they are today. This confidence inspiring them to pursue their career aspirations and attain senior leadership roles. Capturing these early years experiences were imperative to the study as they highlight how investing in our daughters can help shape their futures.

Senior Leader 8 “Perla”

Expressing herself highly of her parents, “my father was a carpenter and my mother did not work for many years, but when she did, she got involved in early childhood education”, Perla shared how in spite coming from a place that was very poor, and having three children of their own, her parents were always giving back to their community. This was a common practice in her household that she only now reflects on it as she shared fond memories during our interview. Perla stated:

When someone didn't have a place to live because they've come over while they were trying to get their family started or whatever, they stayed at our house. That was so common that it actually only stands out for me now. Because I don't think I fully appreciated, with three kids just how giving they (*her parents*) were, and we always had beans and rice like that was kind of our main staple for food. That was like inexpensive and you could have as many people around the table and my mom just made tortillas throughout the meal right and chili right and so my dad brought lots of people home...the basis upon which we lived was that we were part of a community and that the community was our neighborhood it was our family, it was our church.

These values stayed instilled in her and formed her “perspective on the world”. Eager to give back to her community, today as a government official, this ferocious leader fights to end family homelessness in her community and reduce crime.

Senior Leader 9 “Brianna”

Describing herself as a “dreamer” and “very curious as a child,” Brianna enthusiastically shared how her “humble” upbringing helped heighten her creativity. This creativity is quite evident as she has played key roles in the creation of comprehensive leadership and development programs that have significantly contribute to the career advancement of women and men alike. Born and raised in a ranger station with a population of about 200 people, she described it as a “tight knit little community” that allowed her and other ranger kids to roam free. Sharing her early childhood years with such joy, Brianna stated:

Back in the 60s there was no cable tv, no internet... We were raised to be resourceful and independent. All the kids on the ranger station played outside you know in the dark and all weekend long we just roamed around all over swimming and picking blackberries in and out of each other’s houses. Whatever parent was nearby fed us...and we didn’t have access, there was no movie theater, no hospital, so we had to make our own fun... The reason I think I’m telling you this very long story is now that I’m much older I look back and I don't even think I knew for many years how that informed my own journey. We learned to be creative you know, we learn to think for ourselves, we learn to provide for ourselves...and I think we learned the value of simple pleasures.

Currently in a senior leadership role that benefits over 25 thousand people, Brianna focuses beyond leadership and development programs to address diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging (DEIB) and affordability issues for the members of the community

her role serves. She has established these programs by fostering collaboration among her peers and stake holders across the broader organizations' community.

Senior Leader 5 “Alejandra”

Remerging with joyfulness her early years living in a housing co-op that hosted 65 families of farm workers “my dad picked lettuce and my mom was working on the machines”, Senior Leader 5 shared fond memories of her father. Viewing him as a strong role model with an ease for conflict resolution, he was a contributing factor in building her critical thinking, conflict resolution skills and voice. Alejandra warmly shared:

I idolized my dad because I thought he was very cool. I thought he was super smart and he was a joker and everybody seemed to like him...and so I always thought like oh, my goodness, my dad is so amazing...He always would give us riddles...and so he forced us to have critical thinking skills...I learned when I was very little to speak up. My dad didn't say you need to speak up when there's a problem, but I saw it in his actions. I saw when they (farm workers), would have board meetings...when people would get in arguments, I would see my dad throw out a joke or do something to make them laugh and then say come-on why are you arguing...I saw that and I was like well I'm going to do the same thing...you mimic those things that you see...So I learned very young no conflict is impossible to resolve.

An asset she uses in her leadership role today, Alejandra executes her role with the belief that conflict is not impossible to resolve; we just need to find the right path to get there. This approach has guided her in the management and leadership responsibility for three large units (finance and budget, human resources and facilities) for the organization her role serves.

Senior Leader 10 “Elva”

Raised in a loving home with parents who adored their kids, but also had high standards for them “they made sure we were respectful”, Elva passionately shared that

her parents raised her not to focus on barriers. Those that were there because she is a black woman, she explained. Instead, they wanted her to focus on who she was as an individual and not her race. Elva further informed that while she always followed both of her parents' advice, she viewed her mother as her primary mentor, one that taught her and her sisters how to have a voice; a voice that no one could take away. Elva stated:

They raised us to not focus on the barriers that were there because of our race, but because they wanted us to focus on who we are and who we were as individuals. They wanted us to be committed to excellence, even when I didn't know what excellence meant. I have that same value today, to be committed to excellence...mother and father were both mentors, but my mother probably the most because she was a woman... so, she then taught myself, along with my three sisters how to stand up for ourselves. How to have a voice, how to value and how to make sure nobody took our voice away...and that is a challenge, always so because when you have a voice then in some instances you are not respected for that voice, because people will give you labels like she's an angry black woman, or call you names that begin with the alphabet letter 'B'.

Using her powerful voice, one that from an early age her mother taught her no one could take away, Elva inspires and advocates for others. Today, in addition to her senior leadership role, she represents the voice of hundreds of staff on equity and inclusion issues across her community and empowers them to exercise their voice as well.

Senior Leader 1 “Kate”

Indicating she grew up slightly past a time where women did not have many career options and were limited to either being a teacher or a nurse; Kate described being raised by a father that while “he wasn't particularly progressive, he was extremely liberal politically always” he was supportive and always encouraged her to follow her interests. As the youngest of five children, she had a bit more flexibility to choose and shared early

childhood memories of her father “he was the glue in the family” encouraging her and her siblings to be good students and meet their potential. Kate stated:

I grew up the youngest of five kids in upstate New York...four girls and one boy. My mom actually died when I was very, very young and so my dad remarried, but you know, he was sort of the glue in the family...I never felt limited in terms of what I did...we were always encouraged to be good students...he was always very encouraging to follow what you're interested in...I would say that probably one of the more interesting things when I reflect on my own upbringing, is that my oldest sister is eight years older than me and it seemed that her career options were very limited. She was born in 1952 and it was like teacher or nurse...The rest of us however, did not, so it seemed to be a little generational divide that happened and so we were encouraged to reach our potential. I don't think my dad ever really thought I would do what I ended up doing, you know at all. None of us actually, all of us have done quite well...very successful in our careers.

Encouraged from an early age by her father to follow her interests, Kate went on to have a successful thirty-five year career. She moved up the ranks quite rapidly and has done quite well in her career. This is irrespective to the fact that when she was coming through the ranks most men in the organization looked at women as clerical workers/secretaries, as she shared during part of our interview.

Senior Leader 6 “McKenzie”

Not letting gender-specific obstacles get in her way, McKenzie shared stories about growing up in a house with a “brilliant” mother that encouraged her to make her own way and not be dependent on someone else. “You know, she scored the highest score on the Tennessee teachers’ exam of anybody who had taken it up to that point.” She further indicated that as a result of attending an all-girls school from an early age, she was not exposed to the perception of traditional gender roles. Consequently, these did not have an influence on the life and the career path she would take. McKenzie stated:

I grew up in Memphis Tennessee and I'm the oldest of two children... and went to an all-girls school from three years old...I can't help to think that totally influenced me. I never saw leadership roles as an adolescent that were gender specific, or you know, if anything I never thought of something as being oh well, the guys will always hold these roles and girls will always hold these roles, because in my environment it was single sex. I think that whether I would have admitted it then or not, I definitely think that had an influence on what I wanted.

Having the encouragement of her mother, and not being exposed to traditional gender roles, McKenzie serves as a great example of a young girl that grew to meet her full potential. Today she is the Senior Vice President of Finances, for an international corporation that specializes in global overnight delivery of high-priority packages. She started her career over thirty years ago as a sales executive; learning how to recognize opportunities in front of her and not letting gender specific obstacle get in her way, she steadily moved up the ranks.

Appendix H: Education: Her Story

The following narratives highlight key elements from participant stories regarding their educational experiences starting in the early years. These narratives center within individual participants, and were chosen because they capture examples on how education, which was emphasized on study participants from early age, helped shape their future. In in some cases providing these then young girls with financial independence and a way out of poverty.

Senior Leader 4 “Olivia”

With a bachelor's in education and master's in psychology, Olivia shared that she grew up very poor. Education was a way out of poverty and a way to give back and help her community. “It was all about education, your way out of poverty was absolutely

education”. As such, her mother always encouraged her and her sisters to do well in school. Therefore, the attainment of her education became a main motivation as she was growing up. Olivia warmly shared:

I am one of six girls...I grew up with a single mom in a farm in Arkansas...It was a very comfortable little village. We were very small, like 400 people...So I had this hard upbringing. We were poor...it was about survival...we grew our own food, my mother made our clothes... but it was full of family faith and friends... My mother did not grow up with an education, but she always felt like, ‘you need to get your education to make you better and to keep learning...you owe it to your community to make the community better’...We owe it to her and the rest of the family who helped us do better and take the family further to the next steps, so that was always your motivation. Education was everything!

The strength and support Olivia gained from her mother and community lead her to not only pursue higher education, but to be the founder and CEO of a consulting company that generated \$20Million a year in revenue. Securing herself financially was important as she would never want her mother to want something that she could not get. Olivia made sure that was the case until her mother’s recent passing.

Senior Leader 7 “Victoria”

Growing up in what Victoria described as a loving family where both of her parents had advanced degrees “my dad was quite a well-known physicist and my mother had gotten a master’s in German”, she was always encouraged to do well in school. However, there were no expectations set on her as her parents wanted her to enjoy what she was doing. This is something she appreciated and which gave her the freedom to choose. Victoria stated:

I’m a middle child, I have an older brother three years older and then our sister ten years younger...I grew up in a very warm supportive family...very warm family, very supportive family, you know encouraged to do well in school, but there were no expectations set. So even when I went off to college and even

though my father was a professor and he had graduate students over the house all the time, I didn't really have any idea of what graduate school was so it's not like my parents said, you should go into science and you should get a PhD and all that stuff nothing like that...Mostly through school I thought I wanted to be a teacher...When I was in junior high school I wanted to be an elementary school teacher and in high school I wanted to be a high school teacher, and when I was in college, I wanted to be a high school teacher, you know and it sort of kept going...and they were so supportive...they were great parents because they did not set expectations for me, they just encouraged me to do what I enjoyed doing...

Planning to pursue a math degree, she recalled her father advising her that she would be a better mathematician if she took a physics course. Upon taking her first physics course she ended up loving it and among 48 graduate students, was the only “girl” graduating in her class. Today, she is established not only as a great leader, but as a prominent physicist.

Senior Leader 11 “Hannah”

Hannah grew up in what she described as an upper middle-class family that highly valued education and thought of education as a stepping stone for advancement and socio-economic status. With both of her parents holding advanced degrees, her brother a PhD and sister an MD, the expectations for her as the youngest of three children were high: “I grew up with an expectation of I was going to go to the best colleges, like my siblings did”. Hannah candidly shared:

My family perhaps were very math and science focused. So, my father is a physicist and had his own company, he's an inventor and an entrepreneur. My brother went on to be a physicist, they both have PhDs...My mother was a mathematician, she had a masters from Brown, she wrote math SAT classes...So basically my dinner table conversations were word problems. It was math, it was very focused on not storytelling, but math and science was what we discussed at the dinner table...My sister is a psychiatrist so she's an MD...I think I was really pushed both because I was the youngest, but also because of my family values to see myself as having a lot of potential and really striving to achieve that potential.

Hannah holds a BS in economics, yet she was critiqued by her family as having taken what she described they considered the “easy route” since it is “not a hard science”. The guidance and “criticism” she received from her family lead her to pursue an MBA from Yale. This she believed was good for her family as she was “checking the box in the Ivy leagues”.

Senior Leader 12 “Melina”

Immigrating to the United States from the Caribbean, Melina shared that while her parents did not have advanced degrees or even a college education, they instilled in both her and her sister the importance of education. As such, from an early age and despite not knowing the meaning of college, she knew she was going to attend. This was a driving force in her childhood home. Melina vividly shared:

My father was very strict. He always encouraged us to do our homework. My mother was an avid reader. She always had a book in her hand and I inherited that love of reading from her...I remember growing up we had this huge library in our basement and I would stay in the basement for hours playing school or playing as if I was a school teacher...I would set up my dolls and my dolls were my students and I would pull down books from encyclopedias or whatever books were on the shelves and I would teach lessons to my little dolls. So education was a big driving force in my household. Both my parents themselves did not have advanced degrees, or even college education, they instilled in us the importance of education. I didn't even know what college was, I knew I was going. My parents were very big on you're going to college.

Considering herself a lifelong learner and leaning on the encouragement she received from her parents on the importance of school, Melina passionately dove into her studies. Today she holds a BS an MPA and an EdD and has used her love of education not only as a stepping stone to flourish in her career and meet her personal goals, but to be a mentor and role model for many others.

Senior Leader 13 “Suellen”

Growing up in what Suellen described as upper middle class and the youngest of four children by a lot. She believes her placement in the family impacted her as she always strived to be like her older siblings. In addition, knowing that her father was “very academically oriented” she strived to get his attention by doing well in school “it was the additional carrot of dads’ approval”. Suellen shared:

I’m the youngest of four children and grew up upper middle class. My father was an engineer and my mother a special education teacher. Being the youngest of four, by a lot...I grew up as an only child. So, I think with that I benefited from more. Financially my family had more money by the time I came along...My mother had more time for me and I think my father enjoyed me just because he thought he was done and then there was another...So I think my placement in the family impacted me because I was always striving to be like my older siblings...My father was very academically oriented and I think how I was able to get his attention was by doing well in school.

Raised in a family that was academically oriented, Suellen knew from an early age that in order to align with her father’s expectations, achieving through education was the best approach. This early childhood preconditioning instilled confidence in her and moved her to pursue BA in Communications and an MBA in Strategic Leadership. This strong educational foundation and the confidence she exudes to date, have contributed to her impressive career trajectory and success in senior leadership roles.

Senior Leader 2 “Courtney”

Growing up overseas, Courtney was raised in a family that was diverse in German and American culture “I grew up pretty German, but also at school American, so a real mixed culture”, yet with alike passion for education and strong family values. She

described her family as a strong and supportive family that instilled in her a passion for education and this taking her to Southern California for her undergraduate experience.

I grew up overseas. My parents were teachers in the Department of Defense dependent school system, so that's a school system for military children. My mother is German, my father was American...So I went through the Department of Defense dependent school system where it's an English teaching school...Most of my fellow classmates were military kids as well...Because my mother was German all of her family was nearby and so culturally, I grew up pretty German, but also at school American, so a real mixed culture. Both of my parents are educated, my father also has his doctorate in education and my mother had a master's, and so I came from an environment where both my parents were pretty educated and in education themselves...I had very strong extended family, very strong parents, very supportive and I thought that was normal...I didn't know any different so I just was very, very fortunate in my surroundings.

With both of her parents being well educated and educators themselves, as a young girl Courtney viewed the pursuit of higher education as the norm. Today she holds a BA in Theater Directing/Political Science, an MBA and an EdD in Higher Education Administration. She has however viewed education as the baseline for career mobility and her extensive career trajectory in senior leadership roles are reflective of that.

Senior Leader 3 “Birgit”

Disclosing a slightly different story, Birgit shared that she grew up with a family that was very well educated and whom highly valued education “My dad was an attorney and he'd gone to Harvard...My mom was in the first class of Radcliffe”. However, Birgit further shared that she was kicked out of her house when she was 17 and never graduated from high school, but did receive her GED. In addition, she was married at the age of 18, had both of her children by 25 and went back to school to pursue an advanced education when she reached the age of 30. Viewing this as “an interesting foundation with cracks” Birgit openly shared her story. She stated:

I grew up in the Bay Area and grew up in a family that was very educated... a family that valued education. My parents kicked me out when I was 17 so I actually never graduated high school...so we were estranged for quite a while...There were as you can guess challenges with the family, but also a lot of really good stuff within the family. So I had an interesting foundation with cracks if that makes sense...So then years later I ended going back basically when I was 30...I got my degree in humanities, and then I didn't know really what I wanted to do. I kind of knew that in the environment we had I needed to get an advanced degree. I just felt like without it there was going to be a lower ceiling...but I didn't know what to do...and then I found social work, and as soon as I found social work, it was like I found home.

While she had a rocky start with education and did not have the full support of her family, she did go on to earn a BA in Humanities and Master of Social Work. She accomplished this while working fulltime and raising small children. Today, being the first women to hold this role in her organization, Birgit is the President and CEO of a non-profit organization and is highly admired by the community she leads and serves.