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Senior Female Leadership: An Exploration of Midlife Experiences and the Relevance of Developmental Coaching

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Abstract

The paper aims to increase our understanding of women's experience of senior leadership during midlife and explores how developmental coaching can support women at this career stage. Developmental coaching is identified as relevant to periods of transition in a person's life as it focuses on the person themselves rather than their skills or performance. An interpretivist, qualitative method using semi-structured interviews was applied to a sample of senior midlife female leaders in order to explore the relevance of this coaching approach. Rich data were drawn from a sample of senior female leaders including VPs and C-Suite who shared their midlife experiences, and the role coaching can have at this career stage. Our findings challenge existing narratives of midlife as a period of female decline and confirms the need to understand the diversity of midlife experience across age ranges. More importantly the findings align with previous descriptions of developmental coaching. Critically they support the need to adopt a holistic approach to coaching senior midlife women that takes into account both the professional and personal challenges inherent in this key developmental transition period. This requires a coaching relationship based on an advanced level of coaching maturity and experience on the part of the coach.

Keywords: Senior female leader, Midlife, Menopause, Developmental Coaching.

Introduction

Leaders emerge in the mid to late career stage and this period often coincides with midlife. Midlife is defined as the period between youth and old age, most commonly considered to be somewhere between 40 to 60 years (Lachman et al., 2015). Typically, senior leaders in organizations are in midlife and while this can be a challenging period in the life span for both men and women, it is particularly so for women. The relationship between attainment of senior leader positions and the impacts of midlife on women is a subject that has received little attention (Infurna et al., 2020). This study aims to increase our understanding of this relationship and the role that coaching can play to support midlife women.

Midlife for many women is characterized by biological and psychological change associated with menopause and ageing (Gold, 2000; Grandey et al., 2020), and social change, associated with 'empty nest syndrome' (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009), combined with increased caring responsibilities beyond parenting (Ben-Galim & Silim, 2013; Pierret, 2006). These changes are part of a transition as women move to a different stage of life that often coincides with a mid-later career stage. This transition may cause women to leave organizations, referred to by Hewlett and Buck (2005) as 'off-ramping', many never returning as organizations often fail to recognize the complexities of women's non-linear careers as compared to men (Hewlett & Buck, 2005). This continuing loss of female talent from the organizational pipeline is concerning given its impact on women attaining leadership roles. Research suggests that women are lost from the talent pipeline through voluntary termination at a greater rate than men once they have attained mid to senior level (Leimon et al., 2022). This is damaging because of the financial consequences, but also because of the meaningful ways in which women contribute to organizational culture and the importance of senior-level women. The lack of female role models at senior levels can exacerbate the perception amongst younger women that advancement opportunities are limited (Leimon et al., 2022). If we are to increase female leadership, then it is important to understand women's experience of leadership during midlife and how to support their development at this time.

The paper aims to provide two key contributions to the subject of female midlife experiences and coaching. First, to increase our understanding of women's experience of leadership during midlife and second, to explore how coaching can support women's on-going development during this time. Two specific research questions guide the research study from a theoretical and practical perspective:

1. How do women in senior leadership experience midlife?

2. What are the implications for developmental coaching in term of relevance?

The study draws on data collected from a sample of midlife women in leadership positions who have experienced developmental coaching during midlife transition.

Literature Review

Our literature review explores three concepts that make up the exploratory work of the study, shown in Figure 1 and discussed in the following section.
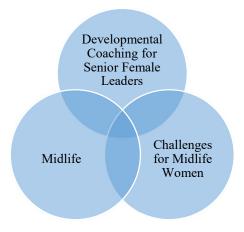

Figure 1. Concepts for the literature review

Midlife

Midlife is the central developmental transition in the life span, and likely to be the longest period in a person's life. If midlife is a recognized stage in life that sits between early and late adulthood (Lachman et al., 2015) definitive age ranges for this period will inevitability vary, the consensus generally being at 40-60 plus or minus 10 years (Infurna et al., 2020). The midlife stage is typically assumed to include periods of unhappiness or 'midlife crisis' although evidence suggests that levels of life satisfaction can be quite stable through adulthood (Infurna et al., 2020). Midlife is often assumed to be a period of difficulty or even crisis in part due to the coming together of a number of factors. Infurna et al, (2020) present a useful conceptual framework of midlife positioned on a timeline from infancy to old age. In the context of our study, it usefully defines midlife by four core characteristics of: *balancing multiple roles*; *life transitions*; *opportunities* and *challenges*. While this framework provides a useful perspective on midlife, it does not capture the differences of gender or enhance our understanding of women's experience of leadership during midlife, the focus of our study. Also assumptions about age and midlife will change as lifespan increases (Gratton & Scott, 2020). This questions the relevance of age in defining midlife. Infurna et al., (2020) suggest midlife is only loosely tied to age boundaries and that midlife is best defined by their four characteristics mentioned above. Nevertheless, theories of lifespan development and the inherent predictability of adult development remain deeply embedded in most organizations, impacting many organizational structures, policies, and practices (Ryan, 2020). This is of concern given the particular challenges inherent in women's experience of midlife and the implications for leadership and retaining senior female leaders in organizations.

Challenges for Midlife Women

Challenges for midlife women include biological and psychological change associated with ageing and the menopause (Gold, 2000; Grandey et. al., 2020), 'empty nest syndrome' (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009), and increased caring responsibilities beyond parenting (Ben-Galim & Silim, 2013; Pierret, 2006). There is of course, enormous variation in women's experience of midlife and this is particularly important when considering women's experience of the menopause and issues of care giving. We now explore each of these challenges.

The menopause naturally occurs during midlife and involves hormonal changes that produce physical and psychological impacts (Grandey et. al., 2020). Women are either premenopausal, early or late perimenopausal, or early or late postmenopausal (Harlow et. al., 2012) and the period of these physical transitions can significantly impact women's midlife years with multiple associated symptoms some commonly reported as problematic for women in the workplace (Ryan, 2020). These include poor concentration/cognitive impairment, feeling low/depressed and lowered confidence. However, it is important to highlight that menopause symptoms are not problematic for all women. Indeed, Hunter et al. (2012) found that only 10-20% of women experienced moderate to severe menopause symptoms. Nevertheless, the menopause is of critical importance in understanding women's experience of leadership during midlife.

The impact of menopause symptoms can be significant, given they are typically most prevalent at 45-55 years, which often coincides with the time in women lives when they are striving to progress their careers. Menopause and the Workplace (2022) noted that women with at least one problematic menopause symptom were 43% more likely to have left their jobs by age 55. Their research found few women sought workplace adjustments, such as

flexible working, with many citing worries about employer's reaction. Moves are now being seen by some employers to improve awareness and policies and practices in the workplace regarding menopause (Newson, 2022), but less emphasis is on the more holistic experience of midlife more generally.

Research describes a 'sandwich generation' characterized by extensive juggling, as women combine multiple caring roles that often include teenage children and/or grandchildren and ageing parents (Ben-Galim & Silim, 2013; Pierret, 2006). Whereas eldercare constitutes the majority of midlife caring responsibilities, many women continue caring for children under eighteen years, which contradicts the widespread assumption in the academic literature that women over fifty are child free (Scales & Scase, 2000). Indeed, as professional women delay childbearing, some may be raising young and dependent children in their forties and fifties (Gatrell, 2008), others will remain child free. Midlife increasingly involves balancing multiple roles, with increasing responsibility for those younger and older in the family.

There is increased awareness by organizations of the effects of the menopause on women in the workplace and a desire by women for an open culture and proactive employer support regarding the subject (Hardy et al., 2019). Research by Dunn (2022) explored the experiences of menopausal women and the value of workplace coaching. Key challenges faced by menopausal women included questioning of professional identify, loss of confidence and management of home and work transitions. Coaching was seen as valuable in supporting women particularly through career transitions and viewed as 'a setting where they were able to explore issues relating to confidence, careers and identity enabling them to move forward in their working lives' (Dunn, 2022, p.104).

Developmental Coaching for Senior Female Leaders

As well as policy change in relation to work-life balance for midlife women, personal development has an important part to play in supporting and retaining senior level women in the talent pipeline within organizations (Leimon et al., 2022). Research identifies the value of coaching to women as a key support for their development (Gray et al., 2019; Hopkins et al., 2021; Dunn, 2022). Stout-Roustron (2013) argues that coaching is one of the key financial investments that can help retain female talent and embed gender diversity in organizations. Whilst the term developmental might be applicable to all coaching, it has been used by some scholars to refer to an approach that encompasses the whole person, rather than focusing on skills and performance (Leonard-Cross, 2010). Palmer & Panchal (2011, p.5) define developmental coaching as coaching that 'facilitates the effective negotiation of key lifespan transitions, supporting positive growth and development' with particular focus on life transitions, generational perspectives and positive growth. Jackson and Cox (2018) similarly view developmental coaching as relevant to lifespan transition and define it as a progression away from the fundamentally behaviorist coaching offered by the skills coach. It moves beyond performance coaching, toward a more constructivist developmental approach. This approach addresses immediate needs and also takes a longer-term perspective on the person's growth.

Developmental coaching as an intervention would typically be "relatively long-term and [one that] emphasizes personal rather than business issues" (Berman & Brandt, 2006, p.245). Jackson and Cox (2018) assert that it is significantly distinct from many other forms of coaching, especially in an executive and leadership context. As developmental coaching

does not necessarily prioritize the organizational agenda, but rather typically has a more open agenda in respect to aligning the needs of individuals and organizations, we propose that developmental coaching is relevant in the context of midlife senior women. Palmer and Panchal, (2011) argue that understanding developmental issues pertinent to a particular life transition, such as midlife, can add depth to coaching people through transition. They propose an integrated model for developmental coaches that combines social, cultural, and generational factors pertinent to developmental transitions across the lifespan. While this model is useful in highlighting the different issues relevant to particular developmental transitions, it is oversimplistic in its representation of the diversity of experience inherent during midlife. Developmental coaching is a particularly useful intervention during midlife, as it can help individuals to address issues arising in relation to identity, meaning and purpose, and health and wellbeing (Donaldson-Feilder & Panchal, 2011). This study aimed to both understand the experiences of senior female leaders during midlife but also to add to our understanding of the relevance of developmental coaching in supporting them in the challenges they face.

Method

Interpretivist researchers explore 'the lived experiences of individuals, in how they understand and make sense of their experiences' (Rose et al., 2015, p.17). Therefore an interpretivist approach was adopted for the study which was experiential in nature with the aim to understand in depth the experiences of midlife senior women in the social context of the workplace and the coaching they had received. The study adopted a qualitative semi structured in-depth interview approach. The sample criteria included that all participants were female and aged 45+ years with age identified within 4 bands. All participants held significant senior leadership roles and had experienced coaching during their midlife transition period aligning with Palmer and Panchal (2011) definition of developmental coaching. Interviews were conducted with fifteen senior female leaders including in Director, Vice President, Senior Executive Vice President or C-suite positions, across a range of organizations and occupational contexts. (See Table 1). Four participants held CBE awards. A purposive sample was recruited via referrals from the researchers' professional networks using the above criteria. All the participants were domiciled in the UK.

PARTICIPANT NO.	AGE RANGE	ROLE	ORGANISATION / SECTOR
1	45-50	Director	Charity Sector
2	45-50	Director	Professional Services
3	51-55	Director	Charitable Foundation
4	51-55	Chief Operating Officer	Professional Services
5	45-50	Executive Director	Professional Services
6	61-65	Government Regulator	UK Government
7	51-55	Consultant Surgeon	Health Services
8	61-65	Director	Financial Services
9	51-55	Director	Health Services
10	51-55	Chief Operating Officer	NGO
11	61-65	Director	Research

12	56-60	Chief Executive Officer	Health Research
13	56-60	Professor	Academia
14	61-65	Consultant Paediatrician	Health Services
15	45-50	Chief Financial Officer	Financial Services

Table 1: Sample Profile

Interview questions are shown at Appendix 1. Data collection incorporated a projective technique in order to 'elicit …..underlying feelings and attitudes' (Rose et al., 2015, p.401) about their experience of leadership and coaching during midlife. Respondents brought an image or object (inspiring paintings, personal and professional photographs as well as objects of personal significance) to the interview and explained how it symbolized their experience of leadership during midlife. Following a pilot study, data was collected via Microsoft Teams video technology, with recording for subsequent transcription. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes in duration and recorded. Recordings were transcribed via Otter.ai. software with the accuracy of transcriptions verified by the researcher conducting the interviews.

Data were anonymized at the point of transcription and in subsequent analysis. Thematic analysis (Oades et al., 2019) was used to identify and analyze patterns and themes within the data and which allows for identification of rich data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A six phased process of analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke, (2022) was followed. Microsoft Teams recordings were transcribed into written form using Otter.ai software. The researcher then immersed herself in the data, reading and re-reading the transcripts and checking back against the original audio recordings to familiarize herself with the data and verify the accuracy of the transcripts. Notes and reflections from the researcher's research diary were also reviewed as a reminder of tone and any nonverbal communication that may not have been evident in the written script. The transcripts were each reviewed and interesting features in the data were manually coded, by highlighting data segments in the text. Initially, a total of 36 codes were identified to describe the content within the data. Further data reduction reviews revealed a smaller number of 24 codes due to overlapping and similarities within the data. A table was created, cross tabulating the data sources with the 24 codes. The data relating to the 24 codes was reviewed by searching for patterns or themes that could be related together and categorized under higher level themes. 4 such themes were identified. The themes were then reviewed by the second researcher and discussed with the original researcher. These 4 themes were defined and named within the context of the original aim and research questions of the study. A detailed report of the themes was produced and verified by each researcher.

Criteria to ensure quality in research such as those included in the recognized 'trustworthiness' approach (credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability) of Lincoln and Guba (1985) are often applied to qualitative analysis. Braun and Clark (2022) question the universality of such criteria and recommend actions specific to thematic analysis some of which the researchers followed in this study: undertaking peer review of data outputs in discussion between the researchers; careful identification and naming of themes; and maintaining a clear electronic audit trail. The research project was subject to ethical review and approval in accordance with the procedures specified by the academic institution. Design of the project was underpinned by guidelines for ethical behavior as set out by Rose et al. (2015).

Findings

Four overarching themes emerged from the data analysis and are discussed:

1. Challenge versus opportunities in midlife

2. Meaning and purpose,

3. Influencing organizational culture and

4. Developmental coaching during midlife.

The first three themes inform us about the experience of female leaders during midlife and the fourth how developmental coaching can support the ongoing development of female leaders during midlife.

Ageing and the Menopause

Discussion of the menopause was relatively limited. Only those in the 45-50 age range spontaneously spoke about their own experiences of the menopause as well as that of other professional women. While there is a lot of focus on the menopause and its problematic nature today, the menopause symptoms experienced by the senior leaders in this study were not overly problematic and did not adversely impact their work as leaders. However, they did describe ways in which the menopause can and has impacted other women's careers using phrases such as: 'being crippled by anxiety' and 'their confidence fell through the floor', (Participant-5: 45-50).

At the same time, menopause opened an opportunity to focus on health and well-being during the midlife years. For those in the 45-50 age range, this was linked to their menopause symptoms and a need to prioritize their health and wellbeing. Participants in the 51-55 age range and beyond also described an awareness of ageing and a need to prioritize their health and wellbeing. Equally, these leaders spoke about the visible signs of ageing and the inevitable implications of age in particular professions such as in surgery with overnight work.

Overall, older participants viewed ageing more positively. It was associated with increased leader effectiveness and productivity and being able to do so much more than their 'younger selves'.

> I think there's no way, my younger self would have been able to deliver everything I do, now. (Participant-12: 56-60).

Unanimously, older midlife women spoke about the opportunity to be more confident as they aged which was distinctly different to their younger selves. This built their identity as leaders. This sense of identity increased with age, emphasizing the importance of authenticity and the joy of being yourself.

> 'When I say to them [younger colleagues], I used to be somebody that couldn't speak up in a meeting, because I didn't think I had anything to say and they would be stunned. I think it's not that I didn't know what to say, it was the fact that I didn't think I was good enough and therefore, I didn't think it was a point worth making. I think that your confidence just grows.' (Participant-6: 61-65)

Meaning and Purpose

Participants frequently described how both their families and work provide a sense of meaning and purpose. They emphasized the absolute importance of their families and how family provides an intrinsic sense of purpose that gives meaning to their life. However, participants also emphasized the importance of their work to themselves, and in its contribution to others.

> 'it's about doing a role where you can make a real difference [in your area of expertise].' (Participant-14: 61-65)

This included roles such as mentor and role model to other women, which many described as a responsibility and something that enabled them to 'give back' and inspire future generations of female leaders who wanted to see that it is possible to achieve what these senior leaders have achieved in their careers: '*someone who sets an example, who in their eyes is pushing down barriers and that's really important'. (Participant-10: 51-55)*

The scarcity of female mentors and role models in their own careers was acknowledged, especially those leaders in the 51-55 age range and beyond. Those in the 45-50 age range described there being few mentors and role models who were mothers with children, and how that would have helped them to progress in their own careers.

Midlife for our female leaders was characterized by multiple transitions that shaped and reshaped their experience of leadership during midlife. These included being parents and/or grandparents, children leaving home, serious accidents, illness and significant career events or defining moments in their leadership. These experiences caused our leaders to reevaluate and reassessed their sense of meaning and purpose, and this often influenced their sense of self and their work as leaders in different ways.

> 'a big transition for me was around when my children became more independent, which was actually quite a dangerous time as it frees up much more time, so it was about being disciplined. I didn't want it to be overwhelmed, but it also gave me more headspace to think about the strategic side of what I wanted to do.' (Participant-7: 51-55)

Influencing Organizational Culture

Our midlife senior leaders increasingly talked about influencing culture in organizations in meaningful ways such as female development programs including career development, ED&I in the workplace and actively encouraging more gender equitable policies and practices that have positively influenced experience of working within organizations for everyone.

> 'I often think men aren't as empowered to do things they actually want to do. So, within [this organization] they know they can come and say, I'm going off to parents evening, and they know that I would be disappointed if they didn't go to the nativity play. So, it's a gentler environment, when compared to other very male orientated environments. (Participant-12: 56-60)

Nevertheless participants, especially those leading in traditional professional contexts such as medicine and academia, acknowledged that women still have a 'much tougher time' than their male counterparts when developing their careers in today's organizations. Additionally, many examples were given of when men's careers have been prioritized over women's in personal relationships. While our participants felt that things were changing and that more women were now becoming leaders in organizations, equally they believed the

pace of change was too slow and that during the pandemic they were *'literally left holding the baby'. (Participant-12: 56-60)*

Participants emphasized the ongoing challenge to work-life balance and the importance of flexibility in organizations and a supportive life partner. Perceptions of work-life balance were seen as changing between and within generations. In the 56-60 age range and beyond, women described the 'work, work, work' ethic that characterized the 'Baby Boomer' years and how perceptions of younger generations were now changing. However, one woman within the 45-50 age range described how the concept of work-life balance had become too rigid within 'Generation X', suggesting instead that work-life balance is a two-way concept that needs to work for organizations as well as individuals. Within the 45-50 age range, women often referred to the boundaries between work and home as being 'intertwined' or 'merged' as opposed to separate.

Developmental Coaching during midlife

Coaching could be transformational for senior women during the midlife years as shown in the quote below, although for the older and more senior woman, coaching became less relevant.

> 'There were two things that were transformative, firstly coaching got me to understand that I needed to invest in me. Coaching also got me to see things from others point of view, which is now my default and that was absolutely transformational.' (Participant 13: 56-60)

Three key factors needed to be in place for developmental coaching to be relevant at the midlife stage: the leader's 'readiness' for coaching; the depth of connection with their coach; and a coaching approach that takes into account the lifestage changes of the client rather than focusing on their skill or performance.

The 'readiness' of senior midlife female leaders for coaching is pivotal in determining the effectiveness of coaching. Respondents who sought coaching and carefully selected a coach, then described their experience of coaching as extremely useful in supporting their development as leaders. Others who had been provided with a coach, often as part of a wider development program, were often suspicious of coaching. They neither understood what coaching was, nor why they 'needed' it.

> 'Why are you giving me a coach? What are you saying? That I don't naturally know what to do? Is that something to do with me being female, a woman; and so it took me a while to get it, to trust, and then I built a really great relationship with her [the coach].' (Participant-2: 45-50)

The connection and intimacy between the midlife leader and their coach determined the quality of the coaching relationship, often referring to them as "my coach". In coaching relationships where there was a sense of connection, the relationship provided a safe space to explore personal and professional challenges during different and often difficult phases in our midlife leaders' careers. These were typically longer rather than short-term relationships, in which the coach was a trusted partner in the leader's development journey.

> 'It's something where the personal relationship is really important; I trust her [my coach], she brings a perspective that is sometimes challenging, often affirmative and she helps me look at things differently. (Participant-11: 61-65).

The developmental coaching approach created space for midlife female leaders to think unencumbered about current professional challenges and future opportunities. The 'supportive challenge' inherent in a trusting coaching relationship, can provide a mechanism that enables female midlife leaders to think strategically, whilst also providing a 'sounding board' where necessary for exploring current professional challenges. Equally, developmental coaching creates a space for female leaders to express frustrations and reflect on their health and wellbeing. Importantly, such coaching also creates space for female leaders to strategize about their career and to think about personal projects that all too often there simply isn't time or space to develop.

Whereas the use of coaching tools such as 360 feedback and personality psychometric assessments can be useful in coaching, the overuse of such tools and techniques with midlife women was not seen as useful, given their advanced level of self-awareness. It was the space that coaching created for female leaders to reflect on their development and the interplay of their professional and personal life, that was most useful during the midlife years.

Discussion

Our aim was to increase understanding of senior female leaders' experiences of leadership during midlife and to explore the relevance of developmental coaching. We now discuss our findings in relation to the two original research questions.

1. *How do senior female leaders experience midlife?*

The experience of midlife was underpinned by biological and psychological change associated with the menopause and ageing, combined with balancing multiple care roles, and shouldering a disproportionate share of domestic work. This is consistent with Griffiths et al. (2010, 2013) and other scholars who aim to raise awareness of the menopause in the workplace. However, our research did not identify menopause as significantly problematic for senior women which is consistent with Hunter et al. (2012). It did demonstrate that senior female leaders continue to absorb a disproportionate share of intergenerational care and domestic work alongside their role as leaders. This is consistent with Hewlett and Buck (2005) and Leimon et al. (2022) who highlight the concerning loss of so many senior-level women from the talent pipeline in organizations potentially due to these reasons, and the importance of retaining senior-level women.

Midlife for female leaders is often punctuated by multiple life transitions and events, which define and redefined who they are as leaders and what is important in their life. However, despite its challenges, midlife for female leaders, particularly the older aged, is experienced as a period of enormous opportunity, associated with increased confidence and sense of identity as a leader. It can be a time of increased productivity and a time to optimize their careers and contribute to the development of future generations of female leaders as mentors and role models and in so doing influence organizational culture. This offers some consistency with early life stage theorists such as Erikson (1982) and Levinson (1979), who suggest midlife is a life stage characterized by re-assessment and re-evaluation, in which the main development task is that of 'generativity'. Equally, this study challenges existing narratives of midlife as a period of female decline and reinforces the need to better understand the diversity of midlife experience (Infurna et al., 2020).

The masculinized culture within organizations continues to influence female leaders experience of leadership. This is experienced most sharply in the on-going challenge to

balance work within the complexities of female leaders' lives. This is consistent with much research on gendered organizations (Stout-Roustron, 2013) and the need to work toward more gender equitable working environments. However, female leaders influence organizational culture in meaningful ways, reiterating the need to increase the representation of women in senior leadership ("Women in the Workplace," 2022; "Women in the Boardroom: a global perspective," 2022) and to retain senior-level women within the talent pipeline in organizations (Hewlett & Buck, 2005; Leimon et al., 2022).

2. *What are the implications for developmental coaching in terms of relevance?*

This study set out to explore the relevance of developmental coaching for female midlife leaders. 'Readiness for coaching' is a prerequisite for coaching senior females during midlife and influences both the quality of the coaching relationship and the effectiveness of the coaching; furthermore, this study indicates the importance of engaging senior female leaders in the selection of an appropriate coach with whom they can connect at a deep level.

The importance of creating a robust and trusting coaching relationship is reiterated in this study. This is consistent with de Haan et al. (2013) in that the quality of the relationship between the coachee and coach is a key factor in predicating coaching effectiveness. We suggest that coaching of midlife senior women requires an advanced level of coach maturity and experience. Furthermore, the study suggests senior female leaders prefer longer term coaching relationships, with periodic coaching as issues arise which is consistent with a developmental coaching approach as described by Berman and Brandt (2006).

A coaching process that focuses on the development of the person as a leader, rather than on their skills or performance, is most appropriate given the critical career stage of the female leader. This approach is consistent with Leonard-Cross, (2010) and Jackson and Cox, (2018), who describe developmental coaching as a progression away from the fundamentally behaviorist coaching offered by the skills coach, through performance coaching, toward a more developmental approach, that addresses immediate needs and also takes a longer-term, more evolutionary perspective on the person's growth. Developmental coaching enables midlife leaders to explore the duality of professional and personal challenges inherent in midlife.

Most significantly, this study proposes developmental coaching can provide senior female leaders with an unencumbered space to reflect on their development as leaders, and the interplay of their professional and personal life during the busyness of the midlife years. Creating space to think would appear to be more important and valued by senior female leaders than the use of any particular coaching tools or techniques.

Conclusions

This research contributes to literature on women's experiences of leadership during midlife, and how coaching with a developmental approach can support during transition. This is important given the continued loss of so many senior-level women from the talent pipeline in organizations. Little is known about women's experiences of leadership during the midlife years, or how coaching can support their on-going development. This research contributes in two ways. Firstly, it raises awareness of the different life experiences of females during midlife and how these vary by age, and the particular challenges inherent in women's experience of midlife. Secondly, it indicates that a holistic coaching approach that embraces the development of the whole person as leader is most appropriate during midlife. However,

this research suggests coaching becomes less relevant as the woman gains in confidence and stature. There is therefore a need to increase HR awareness of the time-bound nature of coaching to support female leaders during midlife.

Limitations and Future Research

Certain limitations exist in this research Whilst the sample was composed of senior female leaders from a range of professional contexts, the convenience sampling approach meant that the sample may have not been fully representative of all senior female leaders. It may have lacked diversity such as representing the experiences of midlife female leaders from ethnic minority and LGBTQIA+ groups. It therefore did not address the effect of intersectionality on female midlife leadership. Furthermore, the sample is biased to senior female leaders in the UK and does not include the experience of female leaders in other countries and cultures. Future research could explore such diversity. This study emphasizes senior female leaders experience of midlife, equally it would be interesting to explore the experience of senior male leaders during the midlife years for comparison. This increased awareness could help inform how organizations create more gender equitable workplaces.

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