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Aspiring to leadership… A woman’s world?

David P. Evans
La Rochelle Business School, 102 rue de Coureille, 17000 La Rochelle, France

Abstract

Reuniting the concepts of glass ceiling, glass cliff and glass border, developed by previous researchers, this paper develops the broader concept of the glass staircase. It argues that obstacles are strewn all along women’s climb to the top echelons of corporate management and brings to light the ever-existing invisible social barriers and prejudices that women leaders face when taking over at the helm of international corporations. The article attempts to demonstrate that although progress is painstakingly slow in this area, there are signs that the tide is changing and that women are poised to play a far more prominent role in the years to come.

1. Introduction

The climb to corporate success is still a very daunting task for most women leaders in the Western world. There are, however, signs that women are finally starting to overcome some traditionally stiff barriers, which have hitherto prevented them from aspiring to the top-notch positions on offer in global corporations. The aim of this paper is to analyze to what extent women leadership styles and personalities are more suitable to current organisational requirements than ever in the past. It attempts to validate the hypothesis that women have made significant progress in aspiring to top leadership positions due to their intrinsic leadership traits and a quickly changing corporate and social environment. It also seeks to determine whether these developments are universal or subject to regional differences particularly between Europe, Asia and North America.

The author makes an important distinction between leadership and management and for the purpose of this paper has concentrated on essential female leadership qualities i.e. their ability to;

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: evansd@esc-larochelle.fr
• influence their employees in the pursuit of organisational goals;
• be visionaries, capable of transforming companies through their natural charisma;
• motivate and inspire their teams.

2. Women’s progress in their climb to the top

Female presence in top management has undoubtedly made itself more visible over the past 30 years. To quote one example, in 1972 in the USA, women held 18% of all administrative positions; in 2002 this figure rose to 46% (US Bureau of Labour statistics 1982, 2003). During the same period the number of women-owned companies rose to almost 50% in the USA constituting roughly 10.6 million firms. This general trend has been echoed in Europe where there has also been a percentage increase of women-owned companies, albeit on a lesser scale at around 30% (Women’s Leadership Exchange 2008).

In previous centuries women leaders were very few and far between. There was an occasional monarch, family business head, civic leader or minister (Hayes, 1999) (Paper presented at the 1999 AERA annual meeting in Montreal, Canada). Women were not often perceived as being suitable for leadership positions, but with the advent of globalisation and the subsequent necessity to manage diversity, the economic and political environment has undergone considerable transformation.

3. Leadership definitions and skills

At the outset, we will distinguish leadership from management by stating that the former deals essentially with the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of goals and the latter with the use of authority inherent in designated formal rank to obtain compliance from organizational members.

Kibort (2002) states, that “exemplary leaders must promote psychological hardiness in a climate of challenge. They must create a stimulating and pleasant workplace environment, while fostering a more effective workplace”. The key issue in leadership is not only leadership per se but increasingly the relationship between leader and subordinates. This theme was highlighted at an earlier stage by Fiedler (1967) in his work on contingency leadership and employee-leader relationships.

As far as pure traits are concerned, Baldoni (2000) defines leadership in terms of; L – Listening and learning from others, E – energizing the organisation, A – Acting for the benefit of everybody, D – Development of themselves and others, E – empowerment of others to lead and R – recognition of achievement.

At a general level, Boyatzis (1982) presented a model of skills clusters, which are necessary at all levels of organisational power. They include visioning and inspiring, entrepreneurial skills, people management skills, implementation skills and a minimum level of specialised knowledge and perceptual objectivity. Coupled with this, there is the notion of self-confidence, which encompasses decisiveness, presence and positive self-esteem. “Self-confident leaders give the impression that they know what they are doing and they are doing it well – they are often perceived as being charismatic”. Baack, Carr-Ruffino & Pelletier (1994) focus more on how leadership skills are perceived differently by men and women as well as indicating that effective oral communication skills and control and poise under pressure are also vital characteristics in leader effectiveness.

4. Gender differences in leadership

When examining basic gender differences in leadership, collaborativeness, nurturance and emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995) are now far more important considerations than power and control. The new international environment and the transformational leadership model, which stresses more supportive and considerate leadership styles, favour to a large extent the female approach.
Transformational leadership (MacGregor Burns 1978), the ability through natural charisma to inspire and
guide the workforce through change and transformation, also emphasizes the achievement of goals by gaining
employees’ trust and respect. Transformational leaders, on the whole, are successful and this fact may help
women to excel in leadership (Eagly & Carli 2003).

In the increasingly important field of emotional intelligence, Mandell & Pherwnai (2003) demonstrated
that women scored higher than men in their tests. They underlined the fact that women have always had a
desire to lead but have been considerably handicapped and politically, economically and socially restricted.
These barriers have now, to a large extent, been removed. Those who are “well rounded and capable of
handling adversity, ambiguity and uncertainty in times of crisis will leave their mark” (Porterfield & Kleiner,
2005).

The model entitled ‘the Colorado entrepreneurial cluster’ is an American media network, which archives
for anytime listening 1000s of interviews of industry leaders, state and local governmental leaders,
educational notables as well as other supportive cluster components such as Venture Capital and Angel
investors. This network takes in achievement orientation, proactive drive, concern with impact, problem
solving and decision-making flair. As regards people skills, we can observe the importance of leaders’ use of
information, networks and coalitions to influence company members to move in a specific direction, this
constitutes a more transactional leadership style.

In the study carried out by Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (1999), one of the major conclusions was that both
men and women agree on the skills most needed by male and female managers to make it to the top echelons
of corporate management. “Stereotyping about women managers still prevailed in a lot of companies: women
managers lack the commitment and purpose required to make it to the top echelons. They don’t visualise
themselves in leadership roles and don’t believe they belong there”. Beyond this, the implications are that
women are strong on soft skills i.e. communicating, negotiating, and dealing with customer relations and
human resources management. Men believe that these perceptions of women managers play an important role
in their promotability within the organisation. The “glass cliff” concept (Ryan & Haslam, 2007) stresses that
women are often brought into top leadership positions where men have failed and the situation is almost
irredeemable. This precarious context makes it doubly difficult for women to succeed, even more so when
they are often judged by different standards compared to their male counterparts.

In the July 2001 issue of Catalyst Newsletter, barriers to women’s and men’s advancement were detailed
as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of mentoring opportunities</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to personal and family</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion from informal networks</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of women role models</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure of senior leadership to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assume accountability for</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women's advancement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotyping and preconceptions of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women's roles and abilities</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of opportunities to take on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visible and/or challenging</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assignments</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Lack of significant general management or line experience

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<tr>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47%</td>
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The top three criteria in the ranking i.e. mentoring possibilities, life-work balance and exclusion from informal networks correspond very closely to our findings in the interviews undertaken with women CEOs and middle managers in France. They underpin women’s main concerns and confirm that once they are in responsible positions there is still a drastic lack of management training possibilities. Stereotyping is still high at 61% although this figure has been on the decline for the past 10 years. It is interesting to note that the biggest barrier for men would appear to be their commitment to personal and family responsibilities.

Mary van der Boon (2003) argues that the real difficulties in management assignments for women stem from intrinsic problems within the corporation and are not always directly related to their specific assignments. Women tend to be far more effective in terms of interpersonal skills, empathy, handling emotions and relationships.

Adler and Izraeli’s survey, carried out in 1994 in 21 countries, confirms that “although we have witnessed a significant increase in women in leadership positions across the globe, certain stereotypical perceptions still prevail e.g. women’s aptitude and qualifications, traditional attitudes concerning women’s role in society, women’s limited access to social networks and ‘old boy’ associations to mention just a few”.

Helgesen (1990) stresses, on the other hand, that the post-industrial economy is more conducive to female leadership styles. Women are more effective on the human and emotional side, they are “quicker to cut through competitive distinctions of hierarchy and ranking and are impatient with burdensome protocols”.

She goes on to add that women are ideally suited to the non-bureaucratic, employee-involved organisations of the 21st century “where teamwork and information flow are paramount”. Women have a greater ability to prioritize than men, and this ability stems from the fact that women tend to be more polychronic and have to juggle with several activities simultaneously i.e. managing the household, bringing up children while pursuing their careers.

In contrast to this, two surveys carried out by Management Research Group (1999) and Hagberg Consulting Group (1998) concluded that it is a myth to believe that women are more democratic than men in their leadership style. In fact, women tend to be more task and results driven at work than men, who often spend more time on business analysis and strategic planning issues. At the same time, women scored highly in the fields of communication, active listening, motivating others and producing high-quality work. They also tended to be more empathetic and more sensitive to their co-workers’ needs.

5. An example of women leaders in France

Research methodology

After examining the general context in France as regards women in leadership, we set about analyzing a sample of women leaders in twelve different French companies. To achieve this, twelve semi-directive interviews were carried out both in-situ and by phone with women occupying leadership positions in France. The original sample was 20, but unfortunately certain persons declined, postponed or were too busy to participate. The questionnaire was designed with a view to getting as candid a view as possible of the current situation in France for women leaders and to establish whether developing trends in women leadership positions in France are consistent with trends covered in the literature review. The women interviewed were essentially middle to top managers working in large private and public companies in industry as well as local government, amongst which were the Reims Chamber of Commerce, Reims Management School, Valeo, Banque Transatlantique, Price Waterhouse Cooper, Medef (the French employers’ Union). Most respondents worked in the field of marketing, communications or human resources management. For the purpose of this paper, we have confined our survey to women respondents in order to get as direct as possible a feedback and
to avoid as much as possible the interference and distortion of any stereotyped male perceptions of women leadership styles. The general idea was to obtain a balance between the private and public sectors, but as it turned out there was a slight bias in favour of the private sector. A questionnaire was drawn up and distributed (see annex 1) and the feedback data from the respondents were subsequently analyzed. The method used to establish the findings was a content and cluster analysis; a number count was carried out on recurrent themes, key words and responses regarding: progress made, preferred leadership models, gender discrimination, invisible barriers and women’s advantages as leaders. The findings were categorized to establish common ground in terms of thinking and behaviour and from this data our final conclusions were drawn up. Care was taken to correlate our findings with some of the key themes developed in the literature research in order to validate or not their accuracy. At the same time, we were interested to see if our hypothesis concerning the rise of women leaders to key positions held true; France served as an example in this process.

6. The situation in France

The French example is an interesting one in as much as it is often very difficult to categorize France into any definite cultural cluster. According to Hofstede’s survey (2000), France is one of the few European countries (excluding Scandinavia) that lean towards the feminine model. This means that quality of life, harmony in the workplace, social protection and a general orientation to egalitarianism and solidarity are very much present in French society.

In France, women represent 47% of the working population, but only 17.2% are in executive management positions. They also receive, on average, 32% less remuneration than their male counterparts (INSEE, 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Proportion of women (%)</th>
<th>Net annual salary (thousands of euros)</th>
<th>Salary differential in % terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>40.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is all the more surprising given the fact that: more girls pass their high school diploma (baccalauréat) 83.7% versus 80.2% in 2006: more diplomas are awarded to female students (in 2007, 21.4% of 25-34 year olds had a diploma attesting 2 years post High School study and 24.8% had diplomas in higher studies compared to 16.5% and 20.3% respectively for men). Another survey carried out by IPSOS in October 2008 amongst 1007 persons from 15 years upwards demonstrated that 79% of the people surveyed (spanning all socio-demographic categories) thought that it was necessary to introduce changes in management practices. Amongst these changes, reinforcing the role of women leadership in corporate governance was one of the most often cited. 57% of those interviewed thought that women had a different way of handling economic and financial risk.

6.1 Some key figures as regards women in posts of responsibility in French companies
According to the 2007 INSEE report, only 10.5% of CEOs or chairpersons are women; 29.2% general managers and 5% on executive boards. Altogether in 2006 (including all company categories) only 17.4% of all salaried managers were women. A subsequent report in 2007 carried out by GEF (Grandes Ecoles au feminin) in collaboration with IPSOS amongst 7000 persons (35% of whom were women) indicated that the gap between the number of men and women in top management positions increased as age advances. For example, there are 29% fewer women leaders in the age bracket of 41-50 years old than men in the same range; this figure is only 26% for the age bracket 31-40. It must be stressed that this survey was conducted amongst graduates from the French Business School network where access to top level management positions is somewhat easier. The 2006 report also points out that women executives on the whole earn roughly 30% less than their male counterparts. It also indicates that whether it be the 31-40 or 41-50 age brackets, 20% more men manage work teams. Smaller teams are often managed by women and teams with over 50 persons by men. As we can see from Table 1, the proportion of women leaders also varies according to the sector of activity (21.6% in commerce, 20.5% in services and 7% in building). The size of the company also impacts the proportion of women leaders. 19.1% of companies with fewer than 10 employees are run by women compared to 8.8% of companies with over 250 employees. It appears from these figures that discrimination amongst French women leaders is most prevalent in the larger corporations.

In the 2008 report from “action de femmes” covering the 500 largest companies in France, 58% of them had no women on their Boards and only 3 had more than 5 women. 135 of these companies had more than 10% of women on their boards accounting for 26.8%. Statistics from the CAC 40 in 2006, indicate that only 9.05% of board members of these top 40 French companies were women. Table 3 indicates the presence of women on French governing boards compared to other European companies. The average percentage in Europe is 9.7%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% of women board members by country</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic of Ireland</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. Conclusions

In this paper, we have analyzed the precarious rise of women to leadership positions in organizations. From the literature review, covered in the first section, we have observed that, in spite of several major barriers, slow but significant progress has been made in many areas. The increasing number of women ascending to leadership positions in companies can be explained by demographic factors. In the Western world, women are getting married later, are having fewer children and can thus devote more time to their careers than ever before. At the same time, facilities are increasingly being offered (child care, crèches, flextime, remote working) to prevent women from being drained from the system after childbirth. In this respect we validate the fact that women are finally breaking through the invisible work barriers and are reaching top leadership positions in companies. At the same time we have seen that this progress depends also on regional practices in promoting women to top positions as well as the size of the companies; women are still more present in medium-sized companies than large corporations. More significantly, this paper has underlined the changing nature of leadership styles in the global marketplace. The new transformational/charismatic styles which have been adopted over the past 10 years and which demand a far more empathetic, emotionally intelligent approach are much more conducive to female leadership in general. The combination of high cultural intelligence (the ability to decipher cultural differences and to exploit them in a multicultural setting) and traditionally excellent negotiation skills have also facilitated the emergence of more women leaders on the international scene. This progress is, however, slow and still hindered by die-hard prejudices and obstacles that prevent women from reaching the pinnacle of corporate responsibility. To meet the needs of the labour market in 20 years’ time, more proactive measures will need to be taken to drastically improve the percentage rate of women studying sciences and engineering to fill this gap.

In the second section of this paper, we have turned our attention to the situation of women leaders in France. Our purpose was to establish whether developments in companies in France generally followed trends found elsewhere in the Western world and even beyond, or whether there were any internal, cultural or political factors that made France the often-quoted exception culturelle.

In spite of the fact that women’s rights (including voting, financial autonomy) were introduced considerably later than in neighboring European countries, there is no evidence in our study to suggest that the situation regarding women leaders in France is significantly different from general trends observed in other parts of the world. Three very precise trends covered in our literature research were corroborated during our interviews; 1) changing leadership styles and specifically the transformational, considerate style are more conducive to women leadership and have assisted them in accessing top management positions; 2) women leaders in France tend to work from a different power base and this in turn fosters better team cohesion, which is doubly important in an international setting; this is consistent with previous research undertaken in this field; 3) personality traits peculiar to women (active listening, empathy, multi-tasking, communicative ability) were also favourably perceived by women and men alike in a global context of financial gloominess and increased employee stress in the workplace.

It must be noted that France has evolved considerably from a predominantly agricultural country at the end of World War II to a modern, technological society boasting excellent transport infrastructures, a model health care system and a well-educated and trained workforce. The role of the State is still very prominent in France and this was corroborated by the fact that there is a considerably higher percentage of women leaders
in the public compared to the private sector. In this context, the feedback from the respondents was very optimistic as regards women’s role as leaders in the new global economy.

Finally, our findings illustrate how a country born in the spirit of social justice has managed, although belatedly, to come to terms with changing gender roles and to provide the necessary infrastructures for women to attain higher levels of career advancement. In the latter case they have certainly progressed quicker than the majority of their European counterparts.

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