



Women Leaders Research Paper



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Introduction

There is some evidence to suggest that the status of women in the workplace has improved in recent years (Carli, 2010). For example, more women are earning bachelor's and advanced degrees, and the gap between women's and men's salaries has started to shrink (Carli, 2010). However, although the emergence of women in leadership roles and in the overall workforce has steadily increased, progress is occurring slowly. From 1970 to 2009, women's representation in the workforce increased from 37 to 48 percent, however at this paper's writing, only 26 percent of all CEOs in the United States are women, with only 2 to 3 percent of women serving as CEOs in Fortune 500 companies (Barsh & Yee, 2011).

One factor that might help explain this lack of women in top leadership is the unique challenges experienced by women in the workplace compared to males. For example, society has general expectations of male and female behaviors and personality traits, as well as expectations for the behaviors and personality of leaders. The problem for women leaders arises when gender expectations do not align with expectations for leadership behaviors shared by the general public, causing negative judgments of women as leaders (Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, Reichard, 2008). Women, historically, have faced increasingly more challenges in a workplace setting than men; however, those women who have successfully filled leadership positions offer an interesting insight into the personality of a successful woman leader. The purpose of the current research is to explore the personality traits related to successful women leaders and to determine which challenges women leaders experience most in today's workplace.

Personality and Leadership

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between personality and leadership. For example, a meta-analysis by Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002) found extraversion to be the most important trait for effective leadership, followed by conscientiousness and openness to experience. Furthermore, Powell, Butterfield, and Parent (2002) found that traits traditionally considered "male," such

as assertiveness and self-reliance, are viewed as necessary for effective leadership. This study seeks to explore the personality traits that are characteristic of successful women leaders.

Barriers to Women Leadership

For women who have been able to obtain a leadership position, there are still inevitable challenges and sacrifices that they will have to make (Slaughter, 2012), such as the challenge of combining career with family and dealing with unfair treatment in the workplace. Many successful woman leaders develop coping strategies to help overcome some of these challenges. For example, some women leaders have been able to rework their own definitions of success in the roles of both leader and mother. They have learned to make these norms more compatible to their lifestyle than the norms prescribed by the larger society (Cheung & Halpern, 2010).

Other strategies of successful women leaders include learning from role models, managing time efficiently, and making a conscious effort to maintain relationships with family members (Carli, 2010). Social and emotional support has been cited as very helpful by women leaders as well as employing self-organizing techniques (Moen, 2010). Many successful women leaders also exhibit strong multi-tasking skills, necessary to effectively juggle work and home responsibilities (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). This study aims to discover which personality traits help women leaders overcome these barriers.

Stereotype Threat and Leadership

Stereotype threat is a phenomenon that occurs when a member of a group engages in an activity or performs a task for which a negative stereotype about one's group exists (Steele, 1997). As a result, the individual may have anxiety over being judged or treated stereotypically. Research suggests that the presence of this threat may subconsciously lead one to underperform and conform to the very stereotypical behaviors that they were trying to avoid (Steele, 1997; Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). Stereotype threat is most likely to impact those who strongly identify with a particular group for which there is a negative stereotype (Steele, 1997; Nguyen & Ryan, 2008).

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that most women are aware of leadership and gender role stereotypes that typically favor men (Eagly & Karu, 2002). This awareness has the power to influence women's leadership behaviors to conform to a stereotypically female role (Eagly & Karu, 2002). Additionally, it has been found that women often react to stereotype threat by adopting more masculine behaviors and communication styles (von Hippel, Wiryakusuma, Bowden, & Shochet, 2011; Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001). However, employing "masculine" behaviors to respond to stereotype threat may prove counterproductive for women. Research suggests that when women leaders adopt a more masculine style in response to stereotype threat, they are rated as less warm by their subordinates and the subordinates are also less willing to comply with the requests of the women leaders when compared to male leaders who made the same requests (von Hippel et al., 2011). The current research will help to identify the traits that help women overcome stereotype threat and its possible negative consequences.

Method

Participants

Eighty-five women currently in senior leadership positions participated in this study. Holding a position of vice-president (i.e., leadership responsibilities for a significant functional area in an organization) or greater was the criterion used to determine inclusion in the study. Of the 85 participants, 85 percent completed the Caliper Profile and 92 percent completed the online survey, with 76 percent completing both. To be included in data analysis, both the Caliper Profile and online survey had to be completed, giving us 65 participants in the final sample. The women leaders in this study were 89 percent Caucasian, mostly in the 40-54 age range (42 percent), and represented 60 different companies.

Measures

Personality. Twenty-one personality traits, along with abstract reasoning ability, were measured with the Caliper Profile, a work-focused personality assessment (see Appendix A for the full list of traits and definitions). The Caliper Profile consists of three sections. One assesses the traits of Openness, Empathy, and Flexibility with Likert-type items (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” on a seven-point scale). Another section asks individuals to respond to personal statements that are most like them and least like them, which assesses the other 18 personality traits. In addition, the Caliper Profile measures abstract reasoning ability in a multiple-choice format. The raw scores calculated for each trait are converted to percentile scores based on a large representative U.S. norm sample, resulting in scores on a 1-99 scale.

Self-Rated Performance. The self-rated performance measure (Appendix B) was created for the purposes of this study by assembling typical leadership performance metrics discussed in the literature into a scale. Various aspects of senior leadership were used, including “emphasizing strategic planning” and “coaching and mentoring others in the organization.” Participants were asked to rate their own performance on each of these 15 leadership metrics on a scale of 1 (very ineffective) to 7 (very effective). Ratings on the 15 items were averaged to create an overall measure of self-rated leadership performance.

Barriers. The Barriers measure (Appendix C) was created for the purposes of this study and was based on a review of the literature focusing on the barriers and challenges that women typically experience in leadership roles. Sixteen barrier items were created from the findings of this literature search. This scale requires two responses for each barrier, one indicating how often that barrier is experienced and the other signifying how much stress/anxiety is caused by that particular barrier, both on a seven-point scale. These two ratings were multiplied across barriers to create an index of barrier impact (from 1 to 49), so that a barrier that is experienced often and causes extreme stress receives a higher impact score.

Stereotype Threat. Stereotype threat was measured with a 10-item scale based on a combination of several validated stereotype threat scales, with minor modifications made to items in order to make them relevant to this study (Appendix

D). The selected items focused on the degree to which one identifies with her gender and the degree to which a female leader feels threatened in her leadership position. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” A mean score for each participant was calculated, with higher average scores representing higher stereotype threat.

Leadership Style. Leadership style was assessed with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Avolio & Bass, 2004), which examines one’s tendency toward certain leadership styles. The assessed leadership styles include Transformational leadership (getting employees to take ownership of company goals by providing inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation), Transactional leadership (relying on contingent rewards and management-by-exception), and Passive/Avoidant leadership (taking a laissez-faire approach). Each of these three leadership styles has various behavioral components that are measured through the MLQ. Participants were asked to indicate how often they engage in 45 different leadership aspects, on a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“frequently, if not always”), including aspects such as “I seek differing perspectives when solving problems” and “I wait for things to go wrong before taking action.”

Procedure. All data were collected electronically. The survey portion, which included some demographic questions and all scales discussed above, was administered via SurveyMonkey online software (surveymonkey.com). The personality assessment was completed separately online by each participant via a link to the Caliper Profile. The data from the survey and the Caliper Profile results were merged together using the participants’ names, after which participant names were stripped from the data.

Results

Group Personality Characteristics

We conducted an analysis of the personality trait scores for this group of successful women leaders and found that this group generally scored highest (i.e., potential performance drivers) on Assertiveness, Ego-Drive, Abstract Reasoning, Urgency, and Risk-Taking. As a whole, this group scored lowest (i.e., potential performance inhibitors) on External Structure, Thoroughness, and Cautiousness. These dynamics favor a results- and action-oriented approach, a straightforward and persuasive communication style, and strength in recognizing patterns in data and solving problems.

Self-Rated Performance and Personality

Overall, this group of women rated themselves higher than average on their leadership performance, indicating high confidence in their leadership ability. The areas of “championing ideas or plans of action that they believe in,” “adhering to ethical responsibilities that come with leadership,” and “building professional relationships on mutual trust and respect” were the areas in which participants considered themselves to be most successful. The weakest performance area indicated was “coping with the realities of organizational politics.”

When linking self-rated performance to personality, we found that the traits that were associated with higher performance ratings were Empathy, Aggressiveness, Stress Tolerance, Ego-Strength, Assertiveness, and Energy. We also found a negative relationship between self-rated performance and Accommodation. These traits are reflective of a person who has a straightforward communication style, is resilient and able to handle stress, stays focused on her work tasks, and is able to relate to and understand others.

Barriers Faced by Women Leaders

We examined the barrier impact index (“frequency” and “stress” ratings multiplied) for each barrier. The five barriers that caused the highest negative impact were:

- Feelings of guilt for not spending enough time with family because of work
- Family responsibilities interfering with work
- Resistance from other current leaders
- Having to outperform male leaders to be considered effective
- Lack of support in the household when work is demanding

It is interesting to note that three of the five challenges with the most negative impact for these successful women leaders relate to work-life balance issues. The challenges with the least negative impact appear to be related to dealing with female leader stereotypes, unfair performance evaluations, and exclusion from male leaders’ social networks.

In examining the relationship between personality and negative barrier impact, we averaged the barrier impact scores of all 16 barriers to create an overall impact index. Results showed that the overall negative impact experienced by these challenges as a whole was negatively related to Abstract Reasoning, Aggressiveness, Self-Structure, and Stress Tolerance. These findings indicate that those who exhibit good reasoning ability, high self-discipline, and results orientation and who are able to handle stress well experience less negative impact from common challenges for women in leadership.

Stereotype Threat Impact

Looking at stereotype threat, we found that the items associated with greater stereotype threat were “stereotypes about my gender bother me,” “my gender is central to defining who I am,” and “my identity is strongly tied to my gender.” These results suggest that these women leaders view their gender as a strong factor in their self-identity, which can lead to experiencing greater stereotype threat. However, items related to gender status impacting how others perceive their performance as leaders were rated lower, indicating that this group is less concerned in that area.

In exploring the relationship between personality and susceptibility to stereotype threat, we found that those that tend to be more susceptible to stereotype threat tend to score lower on Assertiveness, Energy, Empathy, Stress Tolerance, and

Risk-Taking while also having higher levels of External Structure. These dynamics are characteristic of a person who is risk averse, has a less straightforward communication style, and prefers a structured environment with established procedures.

Leadership Style

An examination of leadership styles indicates that this group of women most frequently engages in Transformational leadership style behaviors. These results suggest that this group is intellectually stimulating, encourages employees to take ownership of company goals, and provides inspirational motivation. The personality traits related to this type of leadership style include higher levels of Idea Orientation, Empathy, Aggressiveness, Ego-Strength, and Energy. This type of person is creative in solving problems, motivated, resilient, and has the ability to perceive and respond to the needs of her team.

This group of women also exhibits a moderate level of Transactional leadership behaviors. This shows that these leaders at times engage in reward-and-punishment behaviors with their employees. An example of this behavior is defining expectations with subordinates and offering recognition when goals are achieved or, conversely, enforcing a form of punishment when expectations are not met. Linking Transactional leadership style with personality, we found that higher levels of External Structure along with lower levels of Risk-Taking are related to more Transactional leadership behaviors. Those who exhibit a greater inclination toward this style tend to be comfortable working within established rules and regulations and also tend to have a risk-averse personality.

The women in this study showed almost no tendencies toward a Passive/Avoidant leadership style. In other words, they indicated that they almost never avoid leadership behaviors such as clarifying expectations with employees, and they do not wait until work issues go wrong before taking action. The associated traits with this type of leadership style include higher levels of Accommodation and lower levels of Openness, Empathy, Aggressiveness, Assertiveness, Stress Tolerance, and Cautiousness. This combination of traits is reflective of a leader who may be uncomfortable expressing her viewpoints and has less potential to read and respond to the needs of her team.

Conclusion

This study examined the characteristics of successful women in senior leadership positions, the most common barriers that they experience in today's workplace, the negative impact of those barriers on their work and well-being, and their leadership style and performance. The variables examined in this study link together to form a comprehensive story about women in leadership. Personality either enables women or hinders them from overcoming the challenges and stereotype threat they will inevitably face in leadership positions to perform capably in their leadership roles and utilize effective leadership techniques.

Our results show that personality traits of women leaders closely match what are universally considered to be “male leadership” traits. In general, these women are straightforward in their communications style, action-oriented, risk-takers, and are skilled at solving complex problems. Although these traits may have traditionally been considered to be “masculine,” we have found that they are, in fact, universal leadership traits that are embodied by successful women leaders as well as men. While some women may feel the need to adopt more “masculine” styles to be perceived as better leaders (von Hippel et al., 2011), our results show that these characteristics nevertheless help women overcome the barriers they face in leadership roles. In addition to these “masculine” traits, we also found repeated instances in which Resilience, Energy, and Empathy emerged as drivers of successful leadership and ability to overcome obstacles. This appears to be an added benefit for female leaders in particular because of the potentially stressful and challenging situation they are in as minorities in leadership. These personality traits allow them to better understand their subordinates and colleagues, bounce back after failures or rejection, and persevere with their efforts for long periods of time. Therefore, not only do these women leaders exhibit traditionally successful leadership attributes but also demonstrate the attributes needed for success on a path full of resistance and difficulties.

Implications

There are several implications from this study around promoting and supporting women in leadership. Organizations can provide training, coaching, and role-modeling to increase self-discipline and action orientation, both of which have proven to be helpful in overcoming barriers. Women can also benefit from engaging in open discussions and sharing ideas on effective techniques for overcoming barriers, particularly in the area of work-life balance and stereotype threat, with additional flexibility and support from organizations to help with the challenges of work-life balance (e.g. on-site daycare and flexible hours). Women leaders should also have an awareness of their personality to understand their natural tendencies and where they must improve and continue to develop in order to be successful. Finally, having an awareness of the challenges likely to be encountered in leadership positions can help women prepare themselves and employ their mental and emotional resources to overcome obstacles and be effective leaders.

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Glossary of Terms

Abstract Reasoning: Potential to solve complex problems and understand patterns in data.

Accommodation: Desire to help others.

Aggressiveness: Inclination to push forcefully.

Cautiousness: Inclination to make decisions carefully and think through relevant alternatives.

Ego-Drive: Degree of satisfaction gained from persuading others.

Ego-Strength: Capacity to handle rejection and criticism.

Empathy: Potential to sustain a high level of activity over extended periods.

External Structure: Sensitivity to existing rules.

Flexibility: Willingness to modify approaches and adapt to changing circumstances.

Gregariousness: Comfort with meeting new people.

Idea Orientation: Preference for thinking creatively and generating new ways to solve problems.

Level-Headedness: Propensity to remain calm and maintain a steady disposition.

Openness : Receptiveness to new or alternative ideas.

Risk Taking: Willingness to take chances.

Self-Structure: Preference for independently determining work methods.

Stress Tolerance: The capacity to remain unworried about possible negative consequences.

Sociability: The enjoyment of being around and working with others.

Thoroughness: The tendency to pay attention to detail.

Trust: Inclination to take what others say at face value without questioning their motives.

Urgency: The motivation to take quick action in order to obtain immediate results.

Please rate your effectiveness on each of the following behaviors using the seven-point scale (1= “very ineffective”; 7= “very effective”)

1. Helping this organization to thrive.
2. Articulating my organization’s vision and mission to others.
3. Finding ways to support and encourage others.
4. Investing in developmental resources for people in my organization.
5. Establishing goals, priorities, and expectations for my company.
6. Confidently expressing ideas and opinions.
7. Emphasizing strategic planning.
8. Adhering to ethical responsibilities that come with leadership.
9. Providing the energy and motivation propels people along in times of change.
10. Coaching and mentoring others in the organization.
11. Soliciting input from other members in the organization to garner diverse perspectives on complex issues/projects.
12. Championing ideas or plans of action I believe in.

How often do you/have you experience(d) the following challenges in your leadership role? (1= “never” to 7 = “daily”)

How much stress/anxiety do you usually experience over the following challenges in your leadership role? (1 = “no stress/anxiety experienced at all” to 7 = “extremely high stress/anxiety experienced”)

1. Resistance from other current leaders in the company.
2. Unfair/inaccurate performance evaluations from various sources (supervisor, subordinate, peers).
3. Others in the organization underestimating your leadership competence.
4. Dealing with unfavorable gender stereotypes.
5. Unequal treatment in terms of pay and/or opportunities given.
6. Having to adopt an androgynous leadership style (i.e., balancing male and female leader behaviors).
7. Interpersonal resistance from others in the organization.
8. Being a minority in a male-dominated field.
9. Absence of mentoring in your leadership role.
10. Having to outperform male leaders to be considered effective.
11. Lack of confidence in a leadership position.
12. Feeling excluded from informal social networking among other male leaders.
13. Family responsibilities interfering with work.
14. Lack of support in the household when work is demanding.
15. Feelings of guilt for not spending enough time with family because of work.
16. Feeling that others judge you for not spending enough time with your children.

Please select your level of agreement with each of the 10 statements below using the seven-point scale (1= “strongly disagree”; 7= “strongly agree”).

1. I worry that my ability to perform well in a leadership position is affected by my being a woman.
2. My identity is strongly tied to my gender.
3. I worry that if I perform poorly in my position, people will think my poor performance is due to my gender.
4. Stereotypes about my gender bother me.
5. My gender affects how people act toward me as a leader.
6. I worry that people’s evaluations of me will be affected by my being a woman.
7. My gender plays a role in my self-confidence.
8. I feel that others interpret my behavior based on my gender rather than on my leadership abilities.
9. I often worry that my behaviors will be viewed as stereotypically female.
10. My gender is central to defining who I am.