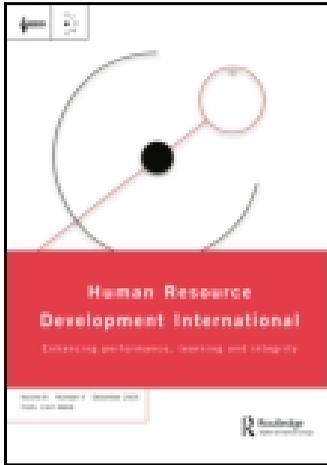


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PERSPECTIVES

Breaking through the glass wall: the experience of being a woman enterprise leader

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This article describes the results of a phenomenological study undertaken to understand the meaning of the experience of being a woman enterprise leader. The experience of women is challenging due to an imbalance in the representation of female executives, barriers to advancement and disconnects in development strategies. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 participants resulting in five essential themes that provide deeper insights into this experience. The five themes present across all enterprise leadership positions and industries. They are: (1) driven by a desire to control their destiny; (2) aspire to leadership positions with impact; (3) achieve influence through a connect-and-collaborate style; (4) initiate culture change while staying focused on results and (5) apply self-knowledge and resiliency to address challenges. The findings provided further clarity on how women approached their careers and lives, the roles of the enterprise leader, the manner in which women led and managed and the issues they confronted on their journey to become an enterprise leader.

Keywords: women in management; female executives; enterprise leaders

Demographic data indicate both considerable progress yet continued imbalance in the representation of women in executive positions (US Department of Labor 2005). While women have been entering the workforce in greater numbers and making progress into management positions, access to executive levels remains limited (Catalyst 2011). Several explanations have been given for this limited progress, which can be broadly categorized as organizational obstacles, interpersonal difficulties and personal challenges (Wellington, Kropf, and Gerkovich 2003). Researchers have attributed this lack of progress to a glass ceiling, an invisible barrier to advancement based on attitudinal or organizational biases (Barr 1996). Likewise, the literature also identified the existence of glass walls, lateral barriers that also limit women's advancement (Wellington, Kropf, and Gerkovich 2003).

Many explanations have been posited as to what holds women back from attaining executive levels primarily investigated through large-scale surveys of these

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women (Schor 1997). Such research may suggest the existence of a problem, but do not tell us much about the lived experiences of women who have broken into executive roles. The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of being a woman enterprise leader so as to gain insight into the nature and meaning of this experience.

Conceptual framework

In increasingly challenging markets, organizations are recognizing that barriers to the advancement of women can be detrimental to their results. Accordingly, the glass ceiling can be costly, not only in terms of lost productivity among women who feel stalled in their careers, but also in terms of turnover costs. Progressive organizations are viewing diversity and inclusion as a business imperative that affects their performance (Jamieson and O'Mara 1991) and impacts the ability to develop and deliver solutions to a diverse customer base (Iles 1997).

Moreover, there is growing awareness that the differences women bring to the workforce are a resource (Loden 1985). Meta-analyses and individual studies found that, although relatively similar to men in behaviour and effectiveness, women leaders tend to be more participative and less autocratic (Northouse 2007). As organizational boundaries change, 'networking and collaboration play a greater role' (Rosener 1995, 5) and the ability to manage across the enterprise will take on significant importance (Ready 2004a). A University of Michigan study (Welbourne 2000) found that companies that have women in their top management teams fare significantly better as publicly traded companies than their all-male counterparts. Accordingly, women constitute a significant and growing proportion of managers in corporations (US Department of Labor 2005) and companies are increasingly recognizing that productivity and profits will be tied to their effectiveness in developing, advancing and retaining female employees (Otte 2004).

The literature supports that organizations will need leaders in the future who can manage effectively across the enterprise (Iles 1997; Ready 2004b). However, the ability to develop these capabilities remains a significant challenge, because many organizations have not defined the key elements of the enterprise leader's job, implemented a process to identify enterprise leaders or defined the learning required (Ready 2004a). In addition, limited research exists on the kinds of experiences that make a difference for significant career transitions from the participant's perspective (Bernthal, Cook, and Smith 2001).

Research identified that general management or line experience (e.g. managing a profit area) was important for development as an enterprise leader and advancement into senior leadership (Estrich 2000). Wellington, Kropf, and Gerkovich (2003) also noted that chief executive officers (CEOs) look for people with high-level profit-and-loss experience when seeking successors. However, census data (Catalyst 2001) indicated that women reported holding only 7.3% of line officer positions. Wellington, Kropf, and Gerkovich (2003) noted that women may not be aspiring to these roles because they are not aware such positions are open to them, may be discouraged from pursuing these roles or may not be in the talent pool when succession decisions are made. However, the lack of research on women's experiences when they choose to remain in senior enterprise level positions limits our ability to effectively advise women on strategies for success in these positions.

Research methodology

This study was based on phenomenology, an interpretive research methodology, aimed at capturing the essence or meaning of the lived experiences as perceived by the participants (McMillan 2004). In formulating the phenomenological question, van Manen suggested, 'To do phenomenological research is *to question* something phenomenologically and, also, to be addressed by the question of what something is "really" like' (1997, 42). Because the ability to work effectively across organizational boundaries is critical to an organization's success, women who transitioned past the 'glass wall' into enterprise leadership positions have an important experience to share. Therefore, the research question, 'What is it like being a woman enterprise leader?' served as a priority focus for the interviews and acted as a guide for the researcher to stay focused on the 'essence' of the phenomenon as perceived by the participants.

To gain insights into the experience of being a woman enterprise leader, 12 women who were in enterprise leadership roles from a variety of industries were selected to participate in this study. These women held executive level titles and had been in their current roles from 4 months to 13 years. Of the participants, nine had graduate degrees, two were college graduates and one had taken some college courses. All participants were white females, whose ages ranged from 37 to 53, with an average of 46.5. Ten women were married, one was single and one was widowed. Of the 12 participants, 9 had children whose ages ranged from 10 to their 30s.

Conversational interviewing was the primary data collection method used for this study. The purpose of the interview process was to gather descriptions from the participants to understand the meaning of what it is like being a woman enterprise leader. During the interviews (ranging from 1 h to 3 h), the researcher focused on what it was like being a woman enterprise leader, asking the participants to think of instances or situations that would reflect this experience.

To understand the meaning of an experience, attributed to it by participants, researchers must be able to suspend or bracket their own assumptions (Creswell 1998). Thus, to remain open to the experience, the researcher engaged in journaling as a self-reflection process to examine her own preconceived ideas about being a woman enterprise leader. The researcher attempted to put these assumptions aside as the research was conducted, so as to be fully present to the participants' lived experience. The process used for theme analysis followed a series of steps that Moustakas (1994) and Polkinghorne (1989) summarized as: dividing the original protocols into statements or units, transforming the units into clusters of meanings and tying these transformations together to make a general description of the experience.

To support validity, the researcher asked each participant to review the analysis and descriptive results compared to their experiences to determine accuracy. In addition, the researcher engaged in peer examination by having two colleagues review the analysis of findings and conclusions drawn.

Findings

The enterprise leader job was described as very complex and demanding, both intellectually and interpersonally. The nature of both the demands and personal characteristics of the women holding these positions led to a unique style and

approach to the job that was reflected in the following five major themes that emerged.

Theme I: driven by a desire to control their destiny

I'm going to own my own career and if it's not the right place, I'm willing to move in order to get the experience that I think I need, or that I want, to enjoy what I'm doing in my career . . . I always tell people that they have to own their own career, that they can't expect that the company owes them something. The company doesn't really owe them anything. The company owes them a paycheck and to be treated with respect. But if they are not treated with respect, they owe themselves something different. (Sarah, VP and General Manager)

The first theme was closely connected with all the other themes and illustrated a strong drive by the women enterprise leaders to control their destiny. Participants articulated that their drive to control their destiny was reinforced through increased self-confidence that came from seeking and experiencing meaningful developmental opportunities, having a strong belief in their ability to be successful and consistently expecting and exceeding performance expectations. Likewise, all of the participants described an ability to take risks in their careers. These experiences provided an opportunity to broaden their business experience to include line management jobs, try out new skills and behaviours and incorporate new learnings into their life experiences. In reflecting upon their career transitions, many women described either asking for profit-and-loss responsibility or being put in charge of troubled divisions. For these women, the drive to control their destiny was fostered by increased awareness achieved from meaningful and visible experiences. Numerous references were made to the discovery of a deeper sense of self and life purpose that was obtained through awareness fostered from these job experiences and their learnings. Likewise, the participants described setting high expectations for themselves which they felt resulted in a proven track record. Thus, having a desire to control one's own destiny was considered an enabling characteristic in that it encouraged women to engage in risk-taking, to take on the unfamiliar, and to persevere.

Theme II: aspire to leadership positions with impact

As long as I'm having an impact, I'm making a difference, I'm having impact, I'm having a good time and I'm in a place where I can be consistent with vision/ mission/ values, than I'm good. So part of what happened to me is I would get to a place and be successful and then my ability to have an impact – you begin to limit your ability if you stay in one place – if you stay in a role . . . I am more of a start-up and turnaround person and a change agent. When you put me into just running a status-quo organization, I frankly get bored, and I am challenged by not having as much of an impact: closing gaps, growth orientation, and people impact. In my role today, I really feel like I impact the stakeholders. (Sharon, Senior VP/Field Operation)

The second theme that emerged demonstrated an aspiration towards leadership positions with impact. The participants described a sense of self-awareness that enabled them to figure out what they wanted in order to stay on course to achieve these roles. The women revealed a strong desire to use power and influence to make an impact, an interest in opportunities to align their personal values with the

corporate value structure and an ability to leverage high-quality relationships as a strategy for success. These leaders expressed having a strong understanding of what they wanted out of life. They were not only self-aware of their own personal mission and values but also understood their values relative to the norms of the organization. Each described seeking out leadership roles and organizations where they could lead in authentic ways consistent with their values. This insight acted as a moral compass for how they made their choices. In addition, the women felt a strong desire to use their power and influence to make a positive impact. In that pursuit, they described being purposeful and searching for corporate value structures that were aligned with their own internal value systems. These women spoke of spending time leveraging high-quality relationships as a key strategy for identifying leadership positions to make an impact. They described cultivating strong professional relationships both inside and outside their organizations, building connections to get ahead, and highlighted their board alliances as important for enabling them to grow.

Theme III: achieve influence through a connect-and-collaborate style

My role is different because my style certainly has a female style to it. My leadership style is setting the vision, authentically communicating it, ensuring that my team understands it, and is also committed to go forward and create value in the organization (Mary, Senior VP)

In sharing their experiences, participants described a leadership style that entailed connecting with others and influencing in a collaborative manner rather than a directive or top-down approach. This collaborative leadership style was further enhanced through the use of strong personal connections, multiple networks and cooperative relationships for purposes of understanding both sides of an issue, sharing power, soliciting advice and feedback, and accomplishing their goals. To achieve influence in such a complex and demanding role, participants described spending a large amount of time interacting within a significant web of relationships, tailoring their communication style, being savvy about how and where they spent their time and acting authentically. A common attribute was the number of people and relationships each cultivated; each describing interacting within a significant web of relationships. Strategic partnerships were developed with their direct reports, to and among peers, their bosses, horizontally across the organization, with their employees and outsiders (e.g. customers and shareholders). Part of the success in building such relationships may stem from what the women believe to be a particularly honed insight into how the people in their organization received information, and that they have achieved influence by using that knowledge to tailor their communication style to fit each individual. In addition, the participants expressed their belief that acting authentically – both with themselves and with the individuals in their organizations – is a way to influence, add value, and achieve results. Finally, they expressed a need to align their values with their behaviour, and to model this behaviour in daily interactions with associates. Doing so was thought to accentuate an authentic leadership style that seeks common ground among decision-makers and earns credibility with associates, allowing for a more meaningful sphere of influence.

Theme IV: initiate culture change while staying focused on results

Change is difficult, both as it relates to thinking beyond the boundaries that you place upon yourself as you generally operate so that you break through and think differently about the business. But then how do you execute and implement that and continue to keep the business moving forward in a constructive, positive manner? How do you do that and align your internal constituencies? How do you do it and align your organization? And how do you constantly stay focused on the marketplace and what the marketplace needs and where it's going so that as you truly evolve your business, you are doing that with not just the view of the current environment, but where the marketplace is going to go and how it's going to evolve. (Julie, President)

A common challenge described by all the participants was that they needed to demonstrate a capacity to balance strategic thinking while remaining focused on day-to-day results. The nature of those demands illustrated a fourth theme, which was an ability to excel at both leadership and managerial behaviours to initiate culture change while delivering business results. These leaders described spending a significant amount of their energy managing day-to-day tactical issues by engaging people in problem-solving and issue resolution. The participants also emphasized the need to be visionaries, taking responsibility for both the development of their organization's story and crafting that story. These women felt that they were knowledgeable and skilled at focusing organizational attention on their customers, the external marketplace and growth. They described how they used this knowledge for initiating culture change, determining appropriate courses of action, developing new strategies and priorities for meeting those demands and engaging their workforce. In addition, participants articulated a variety of ways that ongoing learning opportunities were vital to their development. By investing in their own growth strategies, these women described how they served as a catalyst for the development of talent in their organization. The participants viewed themselves as change agents and expressed a strong desire to be in roles where they could initiate change. The actions in which they engaged were focused on balancing and reconciling tensions between daily activities while staying focused on the strategic direction of their organization.

Theme V: apply self-knowledge and resiliency to address challenges

I do think that there are stereotypes that apply to women that I think women have to guard against to make sure that they are as effective and credible as possible within an environment where the higher you go, the more men there are, the older those men typically are. And they generally have a style and approach, whether it is on communications or business management that might be different. Therefore, how you relate to one another, how you communicate with one another, how you effectively work together are shaped by a whole host of things – gender certainly probably being one of them only in that, it creates some going in biases and expectations. For example, when a woman gets upset about an issue, she's emotional. When a man gets upset about an issue, he is just driving performance. (Julie, President)

Attaining the level of enterprise leader was felt to be a major transition in responsibility due to the level of accountability and visibility. The women described an ability to function with several levels of pressure on them in their current role and climb to become an enterprise leader. These pressures included learning how to adapt to expectations of male-dominated cultures and managing the demands of

multiple roles. All of the women told of having to overcome gender stereotypes and glass ceilings in their climb to become an enterprise leader. These women shared how they used their self-knowledge, risk-taking and resiliency in addressing obstacles they encountered. They also described operating in an environment in which they had to work and live with perceptions that some people had regarding gender stereotypes. Some of these perceptions came from within their own organizations through interactions with their peers, direct reports and the board, and some perceptions came from customers. Likewise, the ability to engage in multiple roles and integrate home, work and community life was another issue identified by all regardless of marital status. These women freely provided examples of how they have learned to address gender stereotypes and integrate priorities of home and work life. Their learnings were a reflection of their own individual needs and how they handled such situations in the past. Participants felt knowledge gained through their experiences and self-reflection had a direct impact on their effectiveness as manager of time and of people. They applied their self-knowledge and demonstrated strong resiliency in addressing and overcoming pressures they encountered in being a woman enterprise leader.

Recommendations for future women enterprise leaders

The five essential themes of the experience of being a woman enterprise leader were closely connected, necessary for building the capacity to develop as a leader, and served as a reinforcing loop. Understanding the common experiences shared by the women in this study may well represent a step forward in breaking down the glass wall and increasing women's participation in the highest echelons of leadership. This research suggests the importance of the following factors for expanding the talent pool to include high-potential women.

Seek out and gain profit-and-loss experience

Previous studies (Morrison, White, Van Velsor, and the Center for Creative Leadership 1987) have noted that women are disproportionately represented in staff positions, those that are less visible, have less responsibility and do not necessarily lead to top leadership. That reality dictates that women must fight for highly visible roles in which they are seen as competent and relevant. In reflecting upon their career transitions, the women in this study described either asking for profit-and-loss responsibility or being put in charge of troubled divisions. That line experience was essential to creating the visibility and track record required to be considered for senior executive roles. Women who aspire to these roles must be made aware such positions are open to them and organizations must consider placing more women in these roles; otherwise, they may not be in the talent pool when senior level decisions are made.

Consistently expect and exceed high performance

Other studies (Morrison, White, Van Velsor, and the Center for Creative Leadership 1987) found that women needed to have a personal drive and determination to succeed by working hard, seeking more responsibility and persisting until the job was done. Likewise, prior research on women leaders found that all reported

experiencing intense scrutiny. These authors indicated that women had to ‘prove up’ regardless of their track record (Kolb, Williams, and Frohlinger 2004, 14). Similarly, participants in the current study expressed that ‘performance was the price of admission’. Hard work and consistently exceeding expectations were described as what opened the doors to recognition and additional opportunities. Doing so is what puts women in a position to take on additional roles and responsibility.

Become self-aware and develop authentic leadership style

The transition to an enterprise leader role was identified in the literature (Charan, Drotter, and Noel 2001) and by the participants as difficult and represented a major shift in responsibility. The position was described by participants as involving a number of different and sometimes conflicting roles that needed to be performed and requiring the importance of excelling at both managerial and leadership skills and abilities. Previous research also found that understanding authenticity may help to identify outstanding leaders (Eagly 2005) and acting authentically guided personal choices that women made in their life and careers (Ruderman and Ohlott 2002). Likewise, the need to be authentic emerged as a strong attribute and was clearly supported by all the women leaders. They described having a good understanding of their priorities and focused their energy on maintaining an alignment between their inner values and outer behaviours. These women set time aside to continuously explore their own needs and capabilities. They were aware of their strengths and development opportunities and championed getting feedback.

Build cooperative relationships and influence with impact

Previous studies (Helgesen 1990; Mintzberg 1973) found a significant aspect of being an enterprise leader was achieving influence, having an ability to connect with people and effectively deliver the message. The participants in this study described being aware of their personal communication style and knowing how to adjust their delivery style to meet the needs of a diverse audience. The ability to influence people was gained by creating, maintaining and leveraging a complex web of relationships. These women shared how they adjusted to their business environment and leveraged a ‘connect-and-collaborate’ leadership style, which was especially helpful in building high performing teams, soliciting ideas, gaining buy-in and managing change. Such a strategy may be useful in developing relationships with new generations of workers.

Learn to become resilient and adaptable

Prior research identified key differences between men and women in management, which centred on how they approached their careers and lives (Loden 1985; Ruderman and Ohlott 2002). From limited research conducted on women who have broken through the glass ceiling, investigators (Catalyst 2003; Morrison, White, Van Velsor, and the Center for Creative Leadership 1987) found female executives differed from their male counterparts in that they had to operate with several levels of pressure on them such as the job itself, their pioneer role and the strain of their family obligations. Other studies highlighted a number of traits that emerged for women who have broken through the glass ceiling, which included being comfortable with ambiguity and completing tasks simultaneously (Rosener 1995),

demonstrating resiliency (Rimm 2001) and having personal drive and determination (Morrison, White, Van Velsor, and the Center for Creative Leadership 1987). Other studies found a major explanation for gender differences in advancement to executive levels was that women were prevented from advancing due to stereotypes (Freedman and Phillips 1988) and influence of male-dominated cultures (Ragins, Townsend, and Mattis 1998). Likewise all of the women in this study told of being driven by a desire to control their destiny, which served as a key motivator in their ability to advance and overcome obstacles. They told of learning how to adapt to expectations of male-dominated cultures and to overcome gender stereotypes. This included knowing the written and unwritten rules in the corporate culture and being able to enter the networks in which a company's opinion-makers move. These women also expressed a desire to live a whole life and described how they had to learn how to manage the demands of multiple roles. All of them emphasized that the ability to integrate home, work and community life required continuous attention and focus. Other techniques for managing that balancing act included setting priorities, modelling a balanced life and having supportive partners. As a result, resiliency and adaptability were among the most important personal skills to achieving success at the highest levels of leadership and contributed to development and growth.

Implications for human resource development (HRD)

The implications of this research for HRD practice are significant. First, the desire to control one's destiny was central to the experience of being a woman enterprise leader. Having inner strength was a core need and was articulated by all women as being driven by a desire to control one's life, having a sense of self-efficacy, being authentic, living according to values and fostering a capacity for resiliency. The HRD professionals would benefit from knowing how to better develop and leverage this talent within their organizations. Second, due to the demanding nature of these roles, women selected for these positions had personal drive, desire, confidence and knowledge to deal with this complexity. The themes of the experience could be used for educating female applicants about these roles and as assessment criteria for selection purposes. Third, women leaders operated with several levels of pressures including the job itself, their pioneer role in the job and the strain of their family obligations. The themes could be used for educating future candidates about strategies found to be most helpful. Additionally, these findings may assist HRD professionals in identifying potential solutions for shattering the glass wall. Finally, the ability to retain qualified leaders remains a significant challenge organizations face because more women are making personal choices to shape their own destiny. The HRD practitioners may need to gain a better understanding of the reasons talented women are leaving and devise retention strategies and new approaches to working with this population.

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