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Exploring Women's Leadership Journeys

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Abstract

Women comprise a very small proportion (28%) of senior managers and leaders in New Zealand organisations and statistics reveal a plateauing in their numbers over the last decade (Grant Thornton, 2012). The dearth of women business leaders has significant organisational consequences. Previous research has shown that women bring a variety of skills and talents to organisations due to their diversity of skills, and decision-making abilities (McKinsey & Company, 2010; Deloitte Australia, 2011). In addition, a series of Catalyst studies from 2004 to 2011 has shown that companies that have more women in their management ranks and on their boards have significantly better revenue and profitability (Catalyst, 2011). Women's active participation in senior leadership is therefore good not only for New Zealand's economy but also for their organisations' bottom lines. This underutilised resource is too valuable for New Zealand to ignore. In this research, I sought to understand how existing women leaders had moved into senior leadership roles in New Zealand organisations and how they had succeeded, in order to find ways of increasing the number of women leaders in the future. Taking an Appreciative Inquiry research approach, I aimed to discover ways of raising the percentage above 28% by interviewing a number of women business leaders about the stories, methods, and strategies that they believed underpinned their transition to top leadership roles. To give the study breadth, I selected women leaders from areas as diverse as public relations, publicly listed companies and not-for-profit organisations and then interviewed them individually to learn about the successes and challenges of their leadership journeys. One unexpected but welcome finding was the lack of evidence from any of the participants of the famous "glass ceiling." Nevertheless, the participants did provide insight into many other challenges women have to face in

order to obtain senior leadership positions. While they didn't find a glass ceiling, the women often indicated signs of continuing gender discrimination. Many of the participants expressed their frustration that getting to the top is a lot harder for women than men and many participants noted that work/life balance was one of the biggest obstacles they had to negotiate. The thesis closes by deriving practical recommendations for the advancement of women to influential leadership positions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Women today make up less than a quarter of party leaders in parliament, less than 30% of judges, less than 25% of senior academic staff, less than 20% of top legal partnerships and less than 15% of CEOs in the top 100 publicly listed companies (Human Rights Commission, 2012). Kellerman and Rhode's (2007) book on women and leadership sets out a pessimistic summary: "While we have made considerable progress in understanding the problem, we remain a dispiriting distance from solving it" (p.1). One key factor in making progress is understanding how women move into leadership roles and that area remains under-researched (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Valerio, 2009; Rezvani, 2010).

I found no New Zealand research in this important area. This study begins to fill the gap by trying to understand how women move into leadership roles in New Zealand organisations, by exploring the journeys of highly successful New Zealand women leaders through a series of interviews. It also aims to distil the learnings from this approach into recommendations that will advance not only my own career but also those of other young women seeking leadership roles in New Zealand. This is not just an equality and justice issue but an economic issue of importance to organisations in New Zealand and beyond. For example, a recent study by McKinsey and Company (2010) showed that companies with a higher proportion of women in senior management were on average 48% more profitable than companies with a lower proportion of women in senior management. Other international research shows that gender balance in leadership correlates with better decision-making, more organisational resilience and economic and productivity

gains (Ministry of Women, 2010; Franke, Crown & Spake 1997; McKinsey and Company, 2010). However, organisations in New Zealand and globally have been slow to respond to the challenge of attracting, retaining and supporting talented women to move into senior leadership positions (Ministry of Women Affairs, 2013).

At this point I need to admit a personal interest. The topic of women in leadership matters to me for a number of reasons. Firstly, I am a woman and leadership is something I feel called to do. From a young age I dreamed of leading and running my own business. I dreamed of being a prominent female leader, a business mogul who does good things in the world, who is acknowledged for her achievements, and who is a role model for other people (men and women) to look up to. I have grown up believing that as a woman I can do anything and that leadership is a part of my DNA. Perhaps this is due to the fact that both my grandparents on my father's side had their own business, and my father has been running his own business for the last 25 years. My parents always instilled in my brothers and me that we were all equal and that each of us could do anything we set our minds to.

On leaving school I embarked on a career in the travel industry. After 10 years working in New Zealand and abroad, a near-death experience helped me to realise that working as an employee was not getting me any closer to my dream. In 2009 I left my job and enrolled at Waikato University. My time at university has taught me many things, both academically and personally. It was here at university while completing a postgraduate paper that I re-discovered my dream of leadership. Personally, one thing I have learnt is how much I really enjoy helping other people. On many occasions my friends and classmates have come to me seeking help and

advice on an array of personal and professional matters. Perhaps this is due to the years of extra experience I have, or perhaps it is just a part of my personality they connect with and trust. What I do know is that leadership is what I feel called to do and this research is just the beginning of my journey.

Rationale

My purpose for this research was to discover a pathway to leadership, by gaining a better understanding of how women move into senior leadership roles. I hope to provide guidance and encouragement to future generations of women who want to move into senior leadership positions.

The main research question for this study was: How do women move into leadership roles in New Zealand organisations? By examining the experiences of women in senior leadership positions, I was interested to learn how, and to what extent, these women's values, beliefs and experiences helped their leadership journeys. I was eager to learn what enabled these women to reach the leadership positions they currently hold. I wanted to know how they got to the top of their leadership path, what advice they could give me and young women who wanted to follow in their footsteps, and how their experiences resonated or failed to resonate with my own experiences and aspirations.

Much of the existing literature has been written from a critical perspective, yet very little has focused on a positive and encouraging approach to help women with specific transition strategies, particularly in terms of information from successful women about how to move into leadership positions (see Davies-Netzley, 1998; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely, Stone, and Ammerman, 2014). This research was born

out of my desire to positively contribute to the body of literature about women leaders. My hope is that these findings will benefit all women, by bringing transitions to leadership into informed focus, especially within a New Zealand context. Although the focus of this study is specifically on New Zealand, lessons are likely to have international application as the lack of women leaders is a worldwide issue.

Thesis Structure

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretic framework and provides an overview of how the research methods were chosen.

Chapter 3 presents an overview of the literature as it relates to the key themes within the literature.

Chapter 4 explains the research methodology; including interview questions, the interview process and the subsequent data analysis.

Chapter 5 presents the results and discussion and highlights the major themes identified in the thematic analysis. Each major theme is discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Chapter 6 highlights the conclusions and outlines the limitations of the study.

Chapter 7 outlines recommendations for women aspiring to leadership, as well as future research opportunities.

Chapter 2: Research Overview

Introduction

The start of a new journey can be daunting. I had the passion and enthusiasm but I had never embarked on a research project this big before. As I was searching for answers I unexpectedly came across a quote by Lao Tzu; “the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” What great advice and just what I needed to hear.

For that first step I needed to decide what theoretical framework would best suit the purpose of the study. In reading about methods, I decided that I wanted to encourage other women – and myself – as well as provide practical advice distilled from successful leaders. Accordingly, my focus was on the positive aspects of this topic, rather than the critical. This narrowed my theoretical framework choices and I drew from *Grounded Theory* (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2005; Charmaz, 2006), *Action Research* (Reason & Bradbury, 2008); and *Appreciative Inquiry* (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom & Cooperrider, 2003), each of which is discussed below.

Qualitative Research

I felt the best way to understand how these women moved into senior leadership positions was to hear their stories directly. I drew from Patton (2002), for whom qualitative research is the best method when seeking to “understand a research topic from the perspectives of the population being studied” (p. 39). In addition I followed Patton’s further suggestion about producing findings from real-world settings where the “phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally” (p. 39).

On that basis, I chose to interview each woman individually and to engage in conversations where I could ask questions directly. Accordingly, I found the

research technique most “fit for purpose” was semi-structured interviews with each participant. These interviews were designed to provide a relaxed and in-depth way to gather qualitative information and to learn directly from my interviewees’ stories and wisdom.

Theoretical Framework

There is no universal truth or silver bullet when planning a research study. As Daymon and Holloway (2011) put it: “every research project is guided by what a researcher wants to achieve and has particular priorities and orientations which direct the research” (p. 5). My guiding purpose was to gather new knowledge in order to discover a pathway to leadership for myself and other women, through the experiences and perceptions of women who had moved into senior leadership roles.

This still left the challenge of choosing the participants. At the start I didn’t really have any idea of who I would interview or what sort of leadership knowledge I would uncover. I wanted the best advice I could get, so I initially set my sights on six (which turned into a total of eleven) of New Zealand’s top women leaders. I knew I wanted to interview each woman individually and have a semi-structured interview approach to allow for discussion around their experiences, values and attitudes in order to extract usable knowledge from their wealth of experience and insights.

In search of practical down-to-earth advice, the first theoretical framework I looked at was *Grounded Theory (GT)*. What attracted me to GT was that it begins with an attitude of openness and has an inductive process of data collection where the researcher has no preconceived ideas. According to Glaser (1978), data collection

in GT methodology begins with a "sociological perspective of a general problem area rather than a preconceived conceptual framework" (p. 44). An advantage of this research process is the theory development process that embeds the stories of the participants. This process encourages systematic, detailed analysis of the data and provides a method for doing so. Additionally the amount of data collected and analysed gives researchers ample evidence to back up their theory. While GT looked a good place to start, I quickly realised that I was seeking to obtain knowledge of processes rather than trying to develop a theoretical model and I could not guarantee reaching saturation with my interviewees since they were unlikely to have the time for follow-up interviews. As a result, while I gained ideas from GT, I rejected GT as the major theoretical framework for this study.

Next I looked at *Action Research (AR)*, sometimes known as Participatory Action Research. AR is a good strategy for studying the problems and limitations of current organizations and finding a way to solve them (Bryman 2008). AR sets out to change things, and while I hope the study will lead to change, the thesis is exploratory and is not large enough for me to go through the additional stages of further reflective action that are essential to AR. At this stage my investigation is almost entirely centred on what can be learned from the participants that can be applied later in my own life and in the lives of other women seeking to be leaders.

Central to AR is its focus on creating change, but this project stops after the gathering and interpretation of rich and in-depth data. Although the theoretical view of AR fits with the qualitative approach of this research, AR as a methodology was not considered suitable for this study because the research goal was to obtain knowledge for my leadership future (and for that of other young women like me)

from the participants, rather than institute change, as that would be a longer process than the production of a thesis allows for. Also, since my research focused on individuals rather than organisations, and was not seeking organisational change, I again drew ideas from AR but chose not to make it the major framework for my research study.

The final theoretical framework I evaluated was *Appreciative Inquiry (AI)*. This is often integrated with AR but was attractive in that its specific distinction is to focus totally on what is good at the moment and what is possible to improve in the future. AI focusses on positive questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI deliberately seeks to work from accounts of the "positive change core" and it assumes that every person has many rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. This theoretical framework fitted perfectly with my desire to generate new knowledge that expanded on the "realm of the possible" for both myself and others. Through the use of semi-structured interviews as the basis for AI, I wanted to evoke positive stories from the participants about high points or exceptional experiences from their leadership journeys. This aligns with Rockey and Webb's (2005) insight that "interviews may well reveal powerful stories and illuminate the key factors of success that made these exceptional experiences possible" (p. 19).

Summary

After evaluating three of the different theoretical framework options, the *Appreciative Inquiry* framework was chosen as the best fit for my purpose. It was designed to encourage positive conversations guided by affirmative questions to help generate actionable new insights and awareness (Hart, Conklin & Allen, 2008).

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

The challenge that this thesis addresses is important in terms of equality. The underrepresentation of women in senior management positions in almost every organization, in the commercial, industrial, military and public sectors has been a worldwide phenomenon (Heslop, 1994, as cited in Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010; Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). The challenge is also important in terms of efficiency and economics since international research correlates a more equal gender balance in leadership with better decision-making, organisational resilience, organisational performance, and economic and productivity gains (Ministry of Women, 2010; Franke, Crown & Spake 1997; McKinsey and Company, 2010). Numerous explanations, including social, behavioural and organizational factors, have been put forward to explain the lack of women in leadership positions.

Much of the existing literature on women and leadership has focused on women's leadership styles, women's effectiveness as leaders, gender and leadership, and barriers to women in leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Yoder, 2001; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly, 2007). This research examines the complexity involved in understanding women's leadership development and advancement, and highlights how external factors impact women leaders. While acknowledging their value, and the often accurate criticisms in these earlier writings, I found very few studies exploring how women achieve senior leadership positions and develop interests and goals for these positions. In line with its positive approach, these are the areas of focus of the present study.

The aim of this study was to gain positive learnings from the experiences of women who currently occupy senior leadership positions. Accordingly, this literature review will focus on the personal attributes, values and drivers of successful leaders and the positive role of mentors and sponsors, while acknowledging obstacles such as the glass ceiling, gender discrimination and work/life balance.

Personal attributes, values and drivers

In trying to find ways to shape my research, my thinking resonated with Therenou's (2001) finding that "levels of ambition have a strong impact on women's progress within the organisational hierarchy, such that the higher they aspire, the greater their chances of reaching the top" (as cited in Moor, Cohen & Beeri, 2015, p. 3). From discussions with female friends and contacts over the years, I remember many expressing ambivalence about ambition. My personal observations on women and ambition found confirmation in The Institute of Leadership and Management's (2011) research showing that, in general, women set their sights lower than men, and are more likely to limit their ambitions to more junior ranks of management.

However, there were also more positive signs. In a McKinsey & Company (2012) survey, 79% of female executives said that if anything were possible, they would choose to advance to C-level management, and 73% of male executives said the same. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) pinpointed relevant actions to turn choice into achievement by finding that leaders had to take active steps to demonstrate their drive and determination to advance.

This clearly shows ambition is the key motivator. This matters because, in their 20-year study, Howard and Bray (1988) found that among a sample of managers at

AT&T, ambition (specifically the desire for advancement), was the strongest predictor of success twenty years later (as cited in Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Motivation is the force that gives human behaviour energy and direction (Reeve, 2015). Psychological research shows that people are driven by different motives and they differ in the extent to which they pursue challenging goals, which reflects their need for achievement (Halpern & Cheung, 2008). According to Barbuto and Scholl (1998), the source of motivation is goal internalization, so the person who is motivated has a desire to reach goals that are consistent with internalised (intrinsic) values. Additional research by Miner (1970) found that managerial motivation was “significantly related to the success of female managers” (p. 197, as cited in Kalkowski & Fritz, 2004), but also found no consistent differences between men and women in managerial motivation. Miner (1970) concluded with the implication that “those women who become managers have the motivational capacity to do as well as males who become managers” (as cited in Kalkowski & Fritz, 2004). The literature clearly indicates that ambition is a key motivator to becoming a successful senior leader.

George (2003) defines authentic leaders as having a “[genuine] desire to serve others through their leadership. They are more interested in empowering the people they lead to make a difference, than they are in power, money or prestige. They are guided by the qualities of the heart, by passion and compassion, as they are the qualities of the mind” (p. 12). Being authentic in the way you lead and caring about individual staff members is what connects leaders and their followers. I know from personal experience that the leaders I have remained in contact with since leaving various jobs have been the ones I felt really cared about me. Authentic leadership can also be defined as servant leadership. Servant leadership processes are founded

upon leaders' behaviours that place others' interests above their own, resulting in followers with enhanced growth and well-being and strong desires to engage in behaviours that benefit the organisation and the stakeholders (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Ehrhart, 2004; Graham 1991; Russell & Stone, 2002, as cited in Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne & Cao, 2015). Therefore leadership is about making a difference, rather than money, power or position. Collins' (2001) study showed that successful leaders created value over the long term and dedicated themselves to building the organisation rather than building their CV, or following personal ambition, or seeking status. Hall (1994) shows that women leaders value having influence more than having power (as cited in Tate, 2008).

Obstacles

The literature on the barriers and obstacles is substantial and provides no support for my desire to have a more appreciative approach. However, this thesis has to acknowledge that scholars have identified a number of obstacles that can prevent women achieving high-level leadership roles. These include: the "*glass ceiling*" (Tavakolian, 1993; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Baxter & Wright, 2000; Ryan & Haslam, 2005) the "*glass cliff*" (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), the "*labyrinth*" (DeFrank-Cole, Latimer, Reed, & Wheatly, 2014), the need to *balance work and family life* (Eagly & Carli, 2007, McDonagh & Paris, 2012) and the double standards due to subtle or overt *gender discrimination* (DeFrank-Cole et al., 2012; Kellerman & Rhode 2007; McDonagh & Paris, 2012).

The concept of the '*glass ceiling*' has probably been the term most adopted in referring to the "barriers faced by women who attempted, or aspired, to attain senior positions (as well as higher salary levels) in corporations, government, education

and not-for-profit organisations” (Lockwood, 2004, p. 334). Other scholars, such as Haslam and Ryan (2008) have identified an additional hurdle, the “*glass cliff*,” that women must often overcome once they are in leadership positions. The “*glass cliff*” describes the precarious progress of women appointed to leadership positions “associated with increased risk of failure and criticism because these positions are more likely to involve management of organizational units that are in crisis” (Haslam & Ryan, 2008, p. 530). More recently, Eagly and Carli (2007) offered a new term, the *labyrinth*, to describe the complex and varied set of challenges that women face on their journey to leadership. For the purposes of this particular study the literature review identifies, and considers, the three most significant barriers to women as: the glass ceiling, gender discrimination, and work/life balance.

The Glass Ceiling

Frenkiel (1984) and Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) were the first scholars to make reference to the glass ceiling (as cited in Smith, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2012). The term is used to describe the invisible barrier to women seeking to move up organizational hierarchies (Powell, 2012). It indicates that women may pursue, and succeed in, a number of positions throughout their professional careers, but will hit a transparent ceiling when trying to move into senior leadership roles (DeFrank-Cole et al., 2014). The idea of the glass ceiling is that women can see through to the top posts, but are unable to reach them (DeFrank-Cole et al., 2014). Bobinski (2012) explains that while the glass ceiling is real, it is not just one obstacle, but multiple obstacles. Catalyst (2011) finds this phenomenon is responsible for the scarcity of women holding leadership and senior management positions, particularly in business organisations.

Despite those findings, other research reveals women who are beginning to break through the glass ceiling that has historically prevented them from achieving top leadership positions in organisations (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Dreher, 2002; Goodman, Fields & Blum, 2003; Stroh, Langland & Simpson, 2004, as cited in Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Some scholars now argue that the glass ceiling metaphor is no longer appropriate as women have achieved a host of senior leadership positions (Smith, Caputi & Crittenden, 2012). There are multiple research studies that agree or disagree with the 'glass ceiling' metaphor (Tavakolian, 1993; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Baxter & Wright, 2000; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). However, statistics show it is still harder for women to obtain senior leadership positions. This is evident from the 2012 New Zealand Census, where less than 15% of the NZSX Top 100 CEOs are women, and, of management positions reporting to CEOs, only 21% were women (Human Rights Commission, 2012). On the other hand, these statistics also show that while there are several barriers that prevent women from realising their leadership potential, women can, and do, achieve senior leadership positions.

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination can negatively impact women's leadership opportunities and aspirations (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005; Eagly, 2007; Halpern & Cheung, 2008; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007; Morgan & Lynch, 2006; Myers, 2008). Very often this is attributed to the traditional paradigm that leadership is seen as a male domain. O'Leary (1974) and Levitt (2010) are just two among many over the last few decades who have shown how traditional male leadership models and expectations are still current challenges for women in leadership roles.

Recent research has moved away from a focus on the deliberate exclusion of women and toward investigating “second-generation” forms of gender bias as the primary cause of women’s persistent underrepresentation in leadership roles (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013). Research by Kephart and Schumacher (2005) explains that gender discrimination has become more subtle, such as a “lack of job advancement opportunities, a lack of mentors, or being presented with only stereotypical female worker challenges” (p. 4). In a recent Harvard business review Ibarra et al., (2013) suggest that second-generation bias does not require “intent to exclude; nor does it necessarily produce direct, immediate harm to any individual. Rather, it creates a context, akin to ‘something in the water’ in which women fail to thrive or reach their full potential” (p. 64). The authors conclude that, although second-generation bias is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices (and can be hard to detect), when women are made aware of this bias; they feel empowered, not victimized, because they can take action to counter those effects (Ibarra et al., 2013). However, this is often easier said than done in the workplace. I know that many women (including myself) find it hard to address gender issues and often don’t want to be seen as being “too forward” or “aggressive.”

This area of research sees one of the biggest obstacles for women seeking positions of leadership as the mismatch between conventionally feminine qualities and the masculine qualities traditionally associated with leadership (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007, p. 850). The impact of sexual stereotypes on women in management was explored by Schein (1973) and then built on by Heilman, Block, Martell, and Simon (1989). The results of their studies showed men were typically, and stereotypically, seen as successful leaders who were self-confident, skilled in business, objective, forceful, and ambitious. Women were stereotypically seen as exhibiting the

opposite traits of males on all of those competence-related traits. This associates stereotypically feminine traits with incompetence and, consequently, leads women to the conclusion that only by being “un-feminine” can someone be competent (Oakley, 2000). Heffernan (2002) claims that women have finally realized that differences in women's and men's work do not imply that "different from, means less than...It is for all of these reasons that women are, leaving corporations in droves" (p. 58, as cited in Kephart & Schumacher, 2005). Similar research by Rosener (1995) states “the act of leaving large corporations and moving to "smaller, more hospitable organization[s]" is a common response among professional women experiencing workplace discrimination” (p. 113, as cited in Davies-Netzley, 1998). This gives women an opportunity and the flexibility to lead on their own terms.

Work/Life Balance

“The most intense time conflicts between jobs and family surface among women in managerial and professional positions because of the long hours such jobs can require” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 55). This is due to the fact that many top leadership roles have demanding work schedules, unpredictable workloads and in some cases frequent travel (Rhode, 2003). As a result, work-life balance has become one of the biggest challenges for women in the workplace (Kanwar, Singh & Kodwani, 2009).

These challenges among educated women help explain why the higher a woman's education level, the more likely she is to be employed and the less likely she is to have children (Gregory & Kleiner, 1991). A McKinsey and Company (2007) study of middle and senior managers around the world showed that 54 percent of the women managers were childless compared to 29 percent of men (and a third of the women were single, nearly double the proportion of partner-less men). Other

research shows that many highly successful women were delaying motherhood (Livingston & Cohn, 2010), with some foregoing motherhood altogether (Gerson, 1986; Piterman, 2008; Hewlett, 2002; Cheung & Halpern, 2010).

That these are still gendered issues is supported by a 2013 Pew Research survey that showed working women were much more likely than working men to say that family obligations will interrupt their own career advancement, suggesting that balancing work life with the responsibilities of having a baby is an important consideration for women who want to move into higher leadership roles (Livingston, 2015).

For those women who choose to have children, there are many more challenges to balancing work and family life. The pull of child rearing has long been a dominant explanation for the small proportion of women in corporate boardrooms, C-suites, partnerships, and other seats of power (Ely et al., 2014). It has been accompanied by a substantial amount of debate as to why a number of women elect to “opt out” of a challenging career track (Halpern & Cheung, 2008; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Slaughter, 2012). Some authors claim it is due to women wanting to spend more time with their children (Halpern & Cheung, 2008; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Slaughter, 2012), whereas other authors claim it is due to workplace problems (Stone, 2013; Ely, Stone & Ammerman, 2014). In a study of 54 female high achievers, where on average the women pursued their career for 11 years; the results showed that 60% of those women worked well past the birth of their second child. In fact, 90% of the women left not to care for their families, but because of workplace problems, chiefly frustration, long hours and marginalization (Stone,

2013). Similarly, Cheung and Halpern (2010) argue that not all women are “opting out” of the workforce to stay home with their babies.

On the other hand, Schwartz (1989) describes how some women put their careers first and make decisions to put in extra hours, to make sacrifices in their personal lives, to make the most of every opportunity for professional development. For women with children, this decision often also requires that they are satisfied to have others raise their children. Therefore, the usual assumption that children are incompatible with high-level success at work does not take into consideration the support provided by a loving supportive partner and family (Halpern & Cheung, 2008).

There is considerable agreement that support from family and work is essential to cope with the demands of high positional leadership roles and positively relates to work/life balance (Schwartz, 1989; Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012). Research by Frisco and Williams (2003) showed that when husbands share housework and childcare, divorce is less likely and wives report less stress. The women who do make it to the top are highly committed to their profession. Several studies show that by adopting different strategies, such as outsourcing household tasks and childcare, women achieve a more sustainable work/life balance (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Slaughter, 2012).

Technology advances, especially in communications, have further complicated these already complicated arrangements. Recent upgrades have contributed to the capacity to contribute to work and to be contacted anytime, anywhere. These developments have had both positive and negative consequences for work/life

balance (Epstein & Kalleberg, 2004; Jones, Burke & Vestman, 2006). Research from the Women's Business Centre, for example, found that 61% of women business owners use technology to "integrate the responsibilities of work and home" (p. 21, as cited in Slaughter, 2012). In that way technology can give women more choices and allow an easier integration of work and family life.

However, deciding when, where, and how to be accessible at work poses its own ongoing challenge, particularly for executives with families (Wallace, 2014). Currie and Eveline (2011) discuss how mobile technologies facilitate choice and flexibility, yet they also blur the boundaries of work and family time. Certainly, there is no clear consensus. Many women still feel significant conflict between career and family life and have major concerns about their work/life balance (Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014).

Men, on the other hand, clearly find parenthood more compatible with a leadership career than women. Having a family is a difficult choice faced more by female managers who aspire to senior positions. Several authors dispel the notion of women being able to "have it all" in today's society (Halpern & Cheung, 2008; Slaughter, 2012). The harsh reality was shown in a Halpern and Cheung (2008) report that stated that the highly successful women they interviewed were often told: "You can choose either a baby or a briefcase" (p. 5).

Mentors and Sponsors

Research published by Catalyst (2011) has shown that typically women start out behind men and often remain behind men in their careers. Additional research has shown that when men and women start in large corporations they move from entry-

level to middle management fairly equally (McKinsey & Company, 2012). However, from mid- to senior-level positions, men advance disproportionately faster, and outstrip women nearly two to one. At the very top-most rungs of the career ladder, men outnumber women nearly four to one (Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin & Sumberg, 2010).

Mentoring is an important part of building support systems for women aspiring to leadership (Gupton & Slick, 1996). Classic forms of mentoring involve a more experienced person who acts as a role model and close adviser to a mentee (Hewlett et al., 2010). Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2004) analysed over 300 research-based mentoring articles in the fields of education, business, and medicine. They found that mentoring yields positive outcomes in terms of learning, personal growth, and development for professionals (as cited in Searby, Ballenger & Tripses, 2015). A Catalyst (2008) study of more than 4,000 high potentials showed that although more women are being mentored than men, women are still less likely to advance in their careers. This is typically due to women's mentors having less organizational clout (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010). Research now suggests that mentoring alone is not enough to get women into senior leadership positions (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Recent research has shown women need sponsors (Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett, 2013). Effective sponsorship is critical to accelerating a woman's career, whether it comes from getting noticed by senior-level executives or being considered for a top job in an organisation (Catalyst, 2011). Economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2013) found that sponsorship beat mentorship when it came to career progression, especially for women wanting to climb higher than middle management. Ibarra et

al., (2010) account for this by claiming that with “sponsorship, the mentor goes beyond giving feedback and advice and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate for promotions and challenging assignments” (p. 82).

Summary

There are multiple theories and research reviews seeking to explain why women are less likely than men to achieve leadership success (Ellemers, Rink, Derks & Ryan, 2012). In my review, I found that ambition, internal motivation and high personal values were seen to be key traits for successful leaders regardless of gender, but the absence of the first of these three was more likely among women. Other literature contended that the process of gaining leadership is often more difficult for women than for men because of many obstacles and barriers.

In reviewing this area of the literature, I drew the conclusion that the writers positioned work/life balance as the number one challenge that women who aspire to senior leadership have to negotiate. However, many researchers showed that with effective sponsorship, women could not only climb the leadership ladder, but could ascend a lot easier and faster. Thus, more sponsorship for women makes sense for business, especially in the light of McKinsey and Company’s (2010) figures that showed companies with a higher proportion of women in senior management were, on average, 48 per cent more profitable than companies with a lower proportion of women in senior management. The same McKinsey (2010) research also found that companies with more women in senior leadership delivered improved performance, which, in turn, provided their organisation with a competitive advantage.

Despite these compelling results, very little academic research has explored how women transition into senior leadership roles. To begin to fill that gap, this research looks at women who are already in leadership roles and explores how they moved into leadership roles, and what advice they might have for moving future generations of women into leadership, and increasing the proportion of women in these positions.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Within this chapter, the ethical considerations, collection procedures and methods of analysis are presented. I have learnt that the research methodology is important as it provides a justification for the selection of theories, methods and tools of analysis used (Kothari, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

Due to the high profile of the women being interviewed, I wanted to make sure the women who chose to participate felt safe to do so. Of considerable importance was the issue of confidentiality, especially due to the fact that there are few women in top leadership positions in New Zealand. Depending on what information was provided, participants could have been identified. To honour the confidentiality agreement and to protect the identity and the interests of each participant, I have removed all names and each participant is referred to by the sequential number of their interview.

My care and respect for the participants is also echoed by the University of Waikato, who require ethical approval for all human research. Therefore before data collection began, I sought and obtained ethical approval from the Waikato Management School Ethics Committee (Approval Reference: WMS 15/29).

Data Collection

Participant Selection

Women leaders from for-profit, public relations (PR) and not-for-profit disciplines were selected, based on two broad criteria. At the time of the interview each participant must have been: 1) in a significant leadership role; and 2) either the

owner of their own business or leading a substantial number of staff. I considered those in significant leadership positions to be at the top of the corporate hierarchy. Consequently, I limited my sample to individuals who held the title of director or chief executive officer.

Initially, I interviewed five women in significant leadership roles who I identified through my own research and networks through LinkedIn. I then asked each of these initial interviewees to recommend other women who also held top leadership positions in other New Zealand organisations. This process of snowball sampling has proved to be an effective technique when studying small or difficult-to-contact populations (Bernard, 1994). Overall, three to four women from each discipline were contacted via phone and email. In total, twelve women were contacted and eleven women were interviewed.

Semi-Structured Interviews

My main goal in these interviews was to learn as much as I could by encouraging the participants to describe their journeys in their own way, with in-depth details about their leadership successes and challenges.

A semi-structured interview was the most appropriate interview style for this study, as it involved a set of open-ended questions designed to allow the participants to share their views, and for me to probe into areas of interest in order to explore experiences, values and attitudes (Barriball & While, 1994). According to Patton (1987) this method of conducting interviews allows the researcher to “achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee’s point of view” (p.113).

Interview Process

After initial acceptance, each participant was contacted by phone to outline the nature of the research and to establish whether or not they were interested in continuing. Following the initial discussion, a formal invitation was sent via email to those who indicated that they were willing to participate. Once consent to participate was given by each woman, an interview time and place was negotiated by email. Once a suitable interview time was arranged, an introduction and background to the study and a participant consent form (Appendices 1 and 2) were emailed to each participant. A copy of the questions (Appendix 3) was also emailed in advance so that participants would have an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences before the interview took place.

The interviews were conducted between March and November 2015 at various locations in Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington. The interview duration was typically one hour, where during the first 30 minutes, the researcher asked the structured written questions (Appendix 3). The remaining 30 minutes were spent asking additional probing questions based on the participants' responses, to gain more in-depth answers on specific topics of interest.

The questions were designed around the nature of the participant's role and the enablers and inhibitors for women in leadership. Participants were also asked to provide strategies they incorporated into their roles and advice for future women leaders. It was important to use the questions as a guide but not be restricted by them. Using a narrative style in the interviews whereby "individuals tell their personal accounts to the researcher" (Creswell, 2002, p. 521) created an environment that facilitated impromptu questions as the dialogue between the

researcher and the participant developed. All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. After the interviews were completed, the recordings were sent to a professional transcriber for transcription.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that Thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns/themes within qualitative data” (p. 6). The process involves the identification of themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). I chose thematic analysis as the primary analysis method because I felt it was the most appropriate data reduction methodology and the best fit for this research study.

A ‘complete coding approach’ was undertaken; Braun and Clarke (2013) explain the aim of complete coding is to “identify anything and everything of interest or relevance to answering the research question, within the entire data set” (p. 206). Hard-copy transcripts of the interviews were printed and read thoroughly to look for commonalities. At first I identified text fragments using key words, sentences and phrases from the transcripts. Next I combined similar text fragments into groups and named each group; this became my initial theme set. Once I had created my initial theme set, all the text fragments for each theme were combined into separate Microsoft word documents. I then reviewed the text fragments in each theme set and identified a number of sub-themes. The last part of the analysis involved creating a mind map to understand the relationships between the themes. As a result the initial theme set was reduced to four key themes and a number of sub-themes.

Chapter 5 Results and Discussion

Introduction

When examining the leadership experiences of the successful women I interviewed, I wanted to find out how they had moved up their leadership ladders. At times, the eagerness to know grew to frustration over what seemed a long and never-ending road to get through all of the raw data. Yet, once immersed in the data, it felt almost as if I was a part of each of my participants' journeys and at risk of finding only individual and unconnected experiences. The big breakthrough came when I was able to identify the emergence of common themes. It was as if the women were all speaking in unison rather than participating in individual interviews. This was the exciting part, this is what I was searching for, and this is the part I want to share.

Participants

Table 1 gives a brief overview of each participant's position, their number of reporting staff, and the annual turnover of their organisations. Due to confidentiality restrictions, only a few details have been given about each participant.

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Role	Not-for-Profit (NFP) or For Profit (FP)	Approximate Number of Staff	Approximate Annual Turnover
1	CEO of a Major New Zealand NFP Company	NFP	1800	80 Million
2	Owner of a Public Relations company	FP	Up to 5	1 Million
3	CEO of a Public Sector Company	FP	6,000	14 Billion
4	Executive Director of a Public Relations Company	FP	Up to 10	2 Million
5	CEO of a Fashion Company	FP	Up to 120	8 Million
6	Managing Director of a Public Relations Company	FP	Up to 10	2 Million
7	Managing Director of a Utility Company	FP	5,000	250 Million
8	CEO of an NZX listed New Zealand Company	FP	3,500	3 Billion
9	CEO of a Major New Zealand NFP Company	NFP	Up to 1000	80 Million
10	CEO of an NZX listed New Zealand Company	FP	1400-6000	2 Billion
11	CEO of a New Zealand Iwi Company	NFP	Up to 100	80 Million

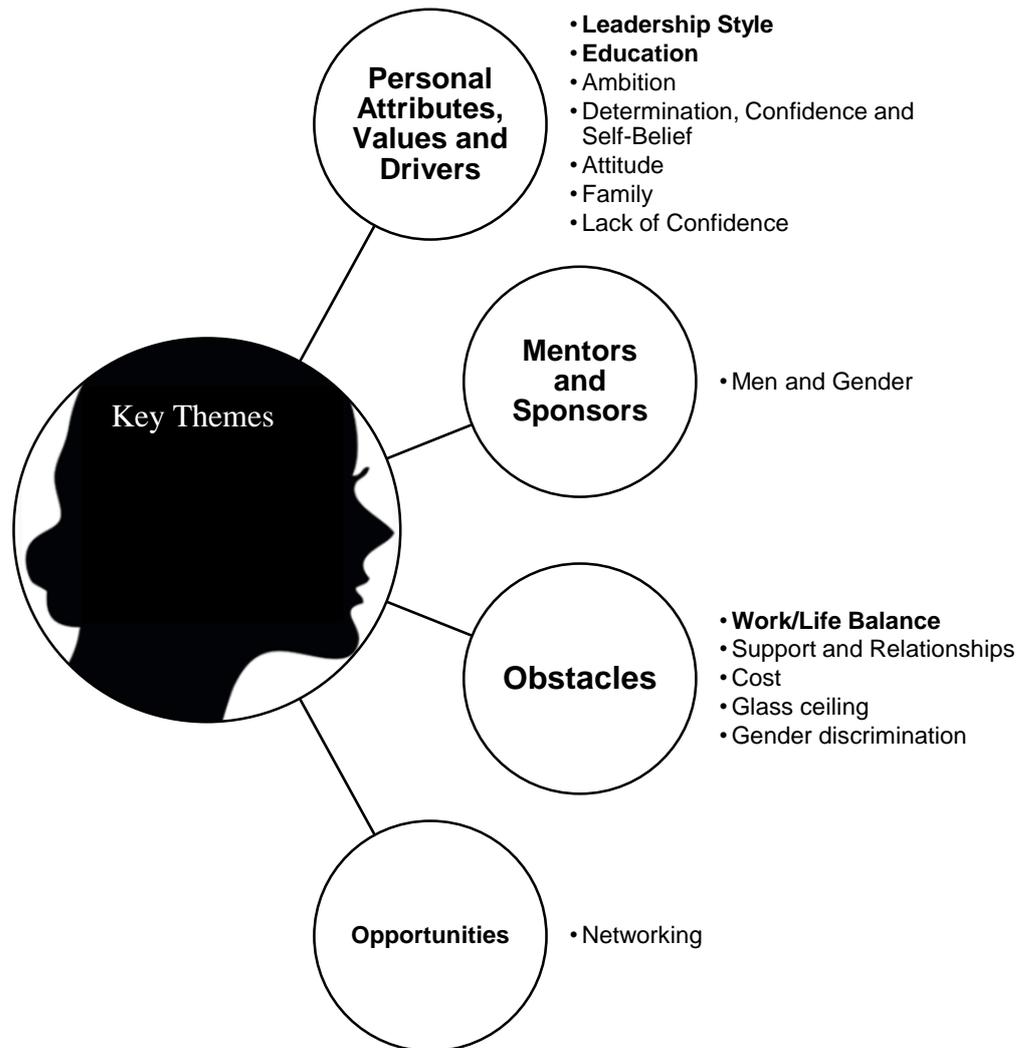
Themes

In the initial phase of the thematic analyses, seeking to catch anything that might be of value, I identified fifteen themes. These are listed in Table 2 with their associated word counts to highlight the most discussed themes. After identifying these initial themes, I gave them visual form by creating a mind map (Figure 1) to display the developing relationships between the themes. Using this process, I was able to reduce the initial theme set from fifteen to four key themes.

TABLE 2 THEMES

Theme	Word Count
1. Leadership Style	7,080
2. Mentors and Sponsors	4,905
3. Drivers, Focus and Values	4,843
4. Attitude	3,733
5. Work/Life Balance	3,721
6. Opportunities	3,674
7. Men and Gender	2,750
8. Cost	2,713
9. Lack of Confidence, Self-Belief and Obstacles	2,540
10. Networking	2,482
11. Relationships and Support	2,201
12. Education	1,747
13. Ambition	1,357
14. Family	1,282
15. Determination, Confidence and Self-Belief	1,007

FIGURE 1 THEME REDUCTION MIND-MAP



Personal attributes, values and drivers

My analysis indicated that the personal attributes and values of each woman developed as a result of their upbringing and significantly shaped their leadership journeys. The participants talked about how the influence of family members (positive or negative) helped shape each of them and affected their personal leadership style. As participant 11 recalled:

The other thing with my grandparents and parents are their values. My dad worked hard, my mother worked hard, my grandparents worked hard, so that expectation was drilled into us too – that we all had jobs to do. That we also were respectful to others, and again so that's respect. Humility, again that was very important for us as we grew up. I think that whole persistence and resilience too, being in a big family, not having a lot of material things but expecting to do well. But I suppose that's why I say that's really my family, and the values that I have, have really been what has I suppose inspired me as a leader, about people.

Leadership Style

Considering the diversity of the participants, one noteworthy result was the similarity in leadership styles, across the corporate, public relations, and not-for-profit participants. I thought there might have been a big difference in how women led in the corporate environment compared to not-for-profit, but it was encouraging to observe transferrable leadership skills across very different sectors.

In line with much of the mainstream leadership literature (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; George, 2003), most of the participants agreed on the value of being authentic in

their leadership style. Participant 8 expressed a common view stating “the most important thing is to authentically be yourself.” George (2003) defines an authentic leader, saying “authentic leaders genuinely desire to serve others through their leadership. They are more interested in empowering the people they lead to make a difference, than they are in power, money or prestige. They are guided by the qualities of the heart, by passion and compassion, as they are the qualities of the mind” (p.12). This accurately describes the overall values of the participants, as leadership for them was not about positional power, but rather about making a difference. This result aligns well with Hall’s (1994) research, which found that women leaders value having influence more than having power (as cited in Tate, 2008).

Personal characteristics such as being passionate with a clear purpose, practicing values consistently, having a high emotional intelligence and developing meaningful relationships were all talked about in the interviews. Nine out of the eleven women spoke about how they use an encouraging approach in their leadership roles to get the best results from their staff. An example of this in action is given by Participant 2: “my style is to be really encouraging and helpful, and making sure everybody has what they need to do their job and do it really well.”

Although the stories around leadership style varied, the general sentiments remained the same. All of the women leaders really believed in the people and the organisations they led. Participant 2 explains this well: “Understanding people’s background a little bit to know, are they people that truly care about what they’re doing, take pride in their work, want to do great things for the client.” Participant 3 had a similar comment:

I think the biggest thing is to know yourself and what you believe in, and to care about other people. Care about the people, really care. Be emotionally involved, and I'm not talking about in an inappropriate way. I'm talking about know them, care about them, understand what they're facing and challenge them. Push and push and push them, but support them every step of the way.

In my search for guidance for myself as a young female leader, I found a valuable lesson was that so many participants expressed the view that effective leaders are encouraging; they bring people with them and grow future leaders. This is also a common theme in the literature (Maxwell, 1995; Kotter, 1999; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Spreitzer, 2006) but it was a strong confirmation. Participant 1 really embodied this with her view that:

I think that's the piece that is so critical around leadership; you've got to bring people with you. But to be able to grow leaders you've also got to be able to identify those that you think are not going to make that, and put your support into those that you think will.

It was a valuable lesson for me to see how these women were practically applying the theory. The passion these participants had for their staff and organisations was inspiring.

Attributes and Values

Ambition was a driving force for all participants. This was surprising because, as New Zealanders, we do not seem an overly ambitious nation. Moreover, women generally are not encouraged – especially in more traditional or religious

environments – to be as ambitious as men. However, research by Therenou (2001) showed that the “levels of ambition have a strong impact on women’s progress within the organisational hierarchy, such that the higher they aspire, the greater their chances of reaching the top” (as cited in Moor, Cohen & Beerli, 2015, p.3). Participant 6 offered a bold statement about her own practice: “I would say I was 5,000% ambitious. I’m ambitious for everything I do. I’m ambitious for my staff, I’m ambitious for our clients, I’m ambitious for my children, I’m ambitious for our country. I think people that lack ambition are sad.” It is clear that her ambition stretches far beyond the merely personal. I also observed how the women frequently linked ambition to being passionate about what you do. Participant 3 provided a similar recollection:

I’ve been passionate about what I’ve done from the very beginning. And I have a wild passion. And that’s everything. That’s what feeds your energy, that’s what drives you every day, that’s what makes you believe in what you do. But for me passion is a given, whereas in our country it’s not, and with most people it’s not.

It has been passion that has led these women to care about others and wanting to make a difference which is one of the main drivers for almost all the women. This raised questions for me about my own passion and about my generation’s passion and how these might link to ambition and be an area of reflection when setting out on different phases of our leadership journeys.

Certainly, the participants’ comments often focused on their internal or external drivers to lead and to succeed. Many of the participants indicated that it was their

own internal drivers that had led them to success. Participant 2 took care to clarify her position “I do want to be good at what I do and I want to be seen as being a leader, but that’s not because I want power and money” and, similarly, for Participant 3: “Money doesn’t drive me. The chance to change something does.”

The takeaway lessons are powerful; I have learnt that successful leadership is not driven by power or money, but by serving the organisation, as a leader, and working to get the best outcomes for the organisation, its staff and its customers. This result is congruent with a growing group of leadership scholars who argue that servant leadership processes are founded upon leader behaviours that place others’ interests above their own, resulting in followers with enhanced growth and well-being and strong desires to engage in behaviours that benefit the organisation and the stakeholders (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Ehrhart, 2004; Graham 1991; Russell & Stone, 2002, as cited in Panaccio et al., 2015). I really liked how Participant 1 explained this: “It depends on what your internal drivers are, I think. You can be ambitious, and that’s really good. We should be ambitious to achieve the best we can, but what’s driving that ambition?”

Attitude and determination were other key attributes for the participants in their leadership positions. All of the women talked about working hard, having a can-do attitude, and taking the outlook that nothing is ever just handed to you. Participant 3 tells the story of when she was given her first leadership opportunity:

The more they told me, the more I wanted to make it true, so I worked and worked and worked. The reality was that I got six promotions in four years, which was unheard of for a young woman in the public sector at the time.

For the women, working hard also became a part of building reputation; the interview comments often focused on having a hard-working attitude. In Participant 4's description "There was always stuff to be done, and that's how you get a reputation as being a hard worker, because you do it." Similarly, Participant 7 tells the story of how ambition and attitude drove her to achieving leadership success: "I was quite happy to take on whatever was put in my way, whatever chores, additional tasks, because I always wanted to be a managing director by the time I was 40."

However "you can't go in there just expecting everything is going to happen for you, you've got to drive it and work it," warns Participant 3 in yet another reinforcement of how women should not have expectations of entitlement and expect everything is going to happen just because you are a woman (Hewlett, 2002; Rhode, 2003). This confirmed my own attitudes towards working hard and being recognised for doing a good job. I have been always taught from a young age that you need to work hard and do the best you can do.

In addition to hard work and things not coming easily, many of the women emphasised the importance of being outcomes-focused and not giving up even in the face of adversity and challenges. In my own life I have had many challenging experiences that have required me to be focussed and not give up, so it was encouraging to see how the participants have used their tough experiences as part of their journey to success. Participant 6 explains "having an outcomes focus to get things done and keep people accountable are kind of key hallmarks of leadership." Participant 5 takes care to stress that these outcomes are integrated into positive behaviours and positive treatments of people: "What matters is the way that I

behave, what matters is the way that I treat people. What matters is what I achieve, the outcomes.”

The participants emphasised the need, at the same time, to maintain integrity. This stemmed from being driven by strong personal values. Hackman and Johnson (2009) ascribe to a similar belief, that leading with integrity comes from our values and beliefs. The common values held by the participants included integrity, respect, and honesty, building positive relationships with staff and clients and also having the ability to have fun. Last year I had to do a university assignment to identify my own personal values. It took me several weeks of reflective thinking but I now know my values include (but are not limited to) integrity, honesty, a caring attitude for people and achievement. Therefore, I was encouraged to learn that for many of the participants, similar values have supported their drive to succeed. I can still hear the wise words of participant 6 “Well it depends what you value, Olivia” ringing in my ears. The overarching message was, when you truly know yourself and what you stand for, it is much easier to know what to do in any situation. This has really driven the learning for me that, by focussing on who you are and what matters most to you, you should be able to find your own leadership style and voice.

The advice in this area was tempered with the challenges involved in acting and speaking with confidence. For example, a number of women talked of a lack of self-confidence. In the words of Participant 6: “Women are not sufficiently resilient and robust and determined and ambitious about their own capability. And they don’t ask.” Similarly participant 5 adds: “I think so many women doubt, they really doubt their ability. Women are very risk averse; it’s more about what they can’t do than what they can do.” The elusive nature of confidence has frequently intrigued me

and what surprised me as I talked with the participants, all accomplished and successful women leaders, was that the discussion about lack of self-confidence always seemed to surface.

One of the breakthrough moments for me personally, was that for these successful women self-confidence, self-belief and self-doubt was not a battle with anyone or anything else but a battle they had identified that came from within themselves. In addition, they commented that working hard to achieve success was a way to overcome self-doubt. Participant 7 tells the story of when she landed her dream job as the chief executive of a major British company: “I remember the next morning after I was appointed, and it sounds a very strange thing to say but you’re in the shower and thinking okay, now what are you going to do? You’ve done this, now you’ve actually got to deliver.” My interpretation is that no matter how successful one becomes, there is always going to be an element of “can I actually do this?” It emphasizes that just because a person is successful does not mean they are exempt from self-doubt, and I believe this knowledge will be very encouraging to a lot of women (and men as well).

What has really resonated with me during this research is that a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and work really hard, but that is not all it takes to be a great leader. Goleman’s (1999) emotional intelligence theory focuses on leaders who control their emotions as well of those of the team. He proposes that the qualities traditionally associated with leadership success, such as intelligence, toughness, determination, and vision, are necessary but not sufficient. Instead Goleman (1999) believes that truly effective leaders also need to be distinguished by a high degree of “emotional intelligence” which includes

qualities such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. One example of this in action was Participant 11's observation that:

The other thing I've learned is you cannot be complacent. You have to continue to nurture that relationship with your team, your staff, and continue to do those things that work well for them. I've got an open line of communication. I'm very clear about what my expectations are.

Upon reflection, all of the participants have contributed useful insights towards my knowledge of how I (and others like me) can move into leadership. The participants confirmed that their values were vital to their leadership success. This echoes leading leadership gurus Kouzes and Posner's (2002) explanation that in order to become an authentic leader you have to "learn how to express yourself in ways that are uniquely your own" (p. 57), it is useful to reflect how much harder that might be for young women in strongly male and masculine environments. I believe one of the lessons I have discovered is that while leadership is a personal endeavour it is also a process that requires continuous learning and self-development and some of the conventional wisdom may be harder, at least initially, for women in general and young women in particular.

Education

It is clearly important that the majority of the participants had supportive families who encouraged them to obtain a university education. My interpretation of these discussions is that the participants' views of leadership began to take shape from a young age, starting with the values they learned, their education, and whether they had positive and encouraging role models. This has been true in my own life, as my

parents have been incredibly supportive of my education and leadership goals. Participant 11 explains “my parents were very staunch about making sure all of their children had an education.”

Among this set of women, there was often a conflict between the expectation of getting married and having a family and going to university to obtain a degree. Participant 4 explains “the expectation was that when you left school you went into a good job, then you got married in two or three years and then you had kids.” Similarly, Participant 3 said “I wanted to go to university, I wanted a life and a career and he wanted me to have lots of babies.” I believe this struggle is still true today; as young women there are expectations (both internal and external) that we should just get married and have children. Remarkably, two of the participants were the first in their families to obtain a degree, which showed great character and determination. Participant 4 said “No-one in my family had ever been to university and there was no expectation that anyone would.” Participant 6 explains “so I’m the first person in my family to have a degree” and goes on to say “I realised that I was going to be successful intellectually in terms of being able to get a degree.” I can relate to this participant’s comment, because when I was younger and at school, I was not particularly “academic.” However after some life experience, I went to university and successfully completed my Bachelor’s degree. I remember thinking that if I could successfully achieve a degree, I could do anything.

Curiosity and an enthusiasm for continuing to learn was a common trait among the participants. Eight out of the eleven women spoke about continuous learning being a key aspect of their leadership roles. This confirmed my own beliefs and experiences and also supported the axiom presented in some research literature that

leaders are learners and should build organisations as learning organisations. Senge's (1990) research on learning in organisations comments on workplaces "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p.3). A number of the women made learning a core value in their organisations; Participant 2 explains "one of my personal values or philosophies is continually learning."

Most importantly, all the women expressed the need to a) never stop learning and b) use all experiences (good and bad) as sources of learning. An important part of being a leader in today's environment is being up to date with information and technology. One entertaining example was when Participant 6 admitted "I don't know how to use Snapchat for business. So I'm going to learn how to do that from one of my junior staff members." She goes on to say "You've got to keep yourself current, whatever level you're at, and leaders are not immune." Participant 1 explains that she prefers to talk to others outside the organisation to learn and challenge her thinking:

The group that I'm in at the moment is called an action learning group. We're all chief executives of varying sized organisations and we bring issues of the day to the table. It's a positive learning environment, and that's the type of environment I much prefer.

Although the stories around leadership style varied, the general sentiments remained the same. The results showed that authenticity, self-confidence, ambition,

a positive can-do attitude and taking opportunities were all seen as necessary personal attributes by these leaders. One of the most powerful takeaway lessons for me was that none of these successful women leaders were driven by power or money, but by serving the organisation and working to get the best outcomes for their organisation, staff and customers.

Mentors and Sponsors

A key finding of this study was that men were women's biggest mentors and sponsors. This was a revelation to me, because before this research I didn't appreciate the role of a sponsor, let alone distinguish the differences between a mentor and a sponsor. What surprised me further was how almost all the women said that it was men that gave them the most leverage to move up the leadership ladder. I had originally thought that because it is so hard for women to get into leadership, it would be other women rather than men helping women to advance. Interestingly, there was only a slight difference between the not-for-profit participants and the for-profit and public relations participants. The not-for-profit women explained that it was a combination of men and women who had mentored them in their careers. Participant 1 sums it up by saying "It's been the men who have given me the most leverage to move but I've had very good support mentoring from women. I think it's probably equal for me." In contrast, participant 11 explains from a corporate view: "well honestly, the mentors that I have had were men." Similarly Participant 3 adds "it was the men who made the opportunities for me in my life, and they did, man after man after man."

In classic forms of mentoring, a more experienced person acts as a role model and close adviser to a mentee. Mentors provide "psychosocial" support for personal and

professional development, plus career advice and coaching (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010). I have learnt from my research that all mentoring is not equal. The participants explained that mentoring can be a formal arrangement through their organisation or just an informal catch up over a coffee or wine. One participant explained “There are two or three people I meet every two or three months, different people and it is usually over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. It is just chatting about the day to day environment and it is quite helpful to bounce ideas off each other.” Recent research suggests that although women may be getting support and guidance (which is still important) mentoring relationships are not leading to nearly as many promotions for women (Catalyst, 2011). The results of my research showed that mentoring was more for emotional support, whereas it was through sponsorship, often by men, that these women advanced their leadership careers.

One of the key learning points for me was the big difference between a mentor and a sponsor. The importance of women getting themselves a good sponsor was a recurring theme, both in the literature (Hewlett, 2013) and in the participant’s responses. Participant 4 explains “There was very general agreement that if you’re a woman who’s looking for advancement, like getting on to boards or wanting to be part of an executive role, that a man is going to be a much more effective sponsor for you than a woman.” My results are similar to the outcome of research conducted at the Centre for Talent Innovation (CTI). This showed that sponsors, not mentors, give you real career traction and influence by affecting three things: pay increases, high-profile assignments, and promotions (Hewlett, 2013). From experience, Participant 10 gave this advice:

The sponsors who find you and say here's an opportunity for you, they're not doing that to do you a favour. They're doing that because they've identified something in you that is of value to the role that they're trying to put you in. So don't be afraid and just have the courage to believe that even though you might think "oh that's a stretch for me," the sponsor clearly doesn't, as it is their reputation on the line too.

Effective sponsorship is critical to accelerating a woman's career, from getting noticed by senior-level executives to being considered for a top job in an organisation (Catalyst, 2011). A recent study, Hewlett (2013) found that sponsorship beat mentorship when it came to career progression, especially for women wanting to climb higher than middle management. Ibarra et al., (2010) explain that with sponsorship, "the mentor goes beyond giving feedback and advice and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate for promotions and challenging assignments" (p. 82). Research published by Catalyst (2011) has shown that typically women start out behind and often remain behind men, even with mentoring. Yet, when women have a highly placed sponsor, they are just as likely as men to get promoted (Hewlett et al., 2010). While this might be a new concept for women, for men it seems that this is nothing new. Many of the participants have encountered men who are not looking for a mentor but a sponsor to help advance their leadership careers. Participant 8 has been in a high positional leadership position for many years and doesn't mince her words when she explains "Men don't want mentoring, men want sponsorship. They want someone in the organisation to say you've got to put Doug in that role, or Jim's the right man. They want sponsors who will back them and support them; they don't want coaches or mentors." Participant 4 gives her opinion on the difference between men and women when it

comes to sponsors “I think it’s actually about men being much more focused on a career.” Leadership expert John Kotter writes, “Extensive informal networks are so important that if they do not exist, creating them has to be the focus of activity early in a major leadership initiative” (Gallos, 2008, p.13). Hewlett et al., (2010) advise that “finding, cultivating, and consistently leveraging powerful alliances offers women not just a career advancement strategy, but an opportunity to practice, refine, and make visible their leadership potential” (p. 4).

What was so encouraging to hear from the participants was how all of them, after being sponsored, had gone on to mentor/sponsor other women (and a few men). One participant explained her reasons by saying “I think that’s really important that we do mentor/sponsor women. I do it because my journey, my own personal journey was dominated by male mentors. So I take it as a personal responsibility, because I’m here doing what I’m doing, but also because I have governance roles to make that pathway a little bit easier for women.” Another participant explained “With mentoring I do and I will help out people I like. That’s why I don’t spend my time working all the time, because I do a lot of things that I don’t get paid for. But I do it because if I can help people develop their own careers and give them some advice I’m happy to do so.”

The participants acknowledged that the support and encouragement they received from their mentors/sponsors guided each of them into leadership pathways that they believe they would not have taken on their own accord. This knowledge has helped me (and hopefully will assist others like me) to realise the importance of seeking out an effective sponsor early in my career to help navigate the leadership ladder. However, in saying that, the initiative to seek out an effective sponsorship (or

mentor) must come from the individual wanting help, as senior leaders “are not going to go out of their way to drag someone along if they don’t show initiative” (Myers, 2016).

Relentlessly Seeking Opportunity

Sponsors create opportunities for women by using their influence with senior executives to advocate for promotions (Ibarra, et al., 2010). Seizing opportunities when presented was essential in each of the women’s leadership journeys. All of the participants admitted that they would not be where they are today if they had not taken the opportunities when they were presented. In Participant 1’s words “one of the things I say is take every opportunity that comes your way because often it’s those opportunities that give you the pathway through.” Opportunities for leadership can arise both within and outside an organisation. Participant 7 boldly advises: “It’s all about you’re looking at what the opportunities are, and how do you make the most of them? And, it’s a horrible word but it’s a word that needs to be used more, how do you exploit the opportunities?”

One sign that this might be happening is how more women are starting their own companies and becoming freelancers in order to have more control over their careers (Newell, 2015). The 2014 State of Women-Owned Businesses report shows that between 1997 and 2014, the number of women-owned firms increased by 68 percent in the USA (Womenable, 2014). This shows that there is a significant number of women striking out on their own — free to be their own boss, build their own company and create their own opportunities. Although this data is American, a similar result is echoed in my research with 46% of the participants creating their

own leadership opportunities by starting their own businesses. Participant 5 explains how she made her opportunities into a business:

It's totally been driven by just a whole lot of opportunities, things that I've chosen to follow, things that I've chosen to look at, risks that I've wanted to take, the way that I've just built the nucleus of this business and just kept on growing it.

According to Bartz and Lambert (2014), leadership today is increasingly defined not just by how many hours you spend at your computer, but your ability to connect to others. One of the major themes to come out of my analysis was the importance of networking, as this proved to be one of the main ways many of the participants discovered different opportunities. Participant 1 advises "You have got to make sure you're networking because that's where you might find opportunities." Similarly, Participant 2 explains "Networking has definitely been the number one reason why I was able to grow my business from day one." It became apparent that networking and opportunities go hand in hand. Participant 2 gave me some good advice around networking:

I think you just have to be intentional with your networking. Find opportunities. First of all know what you want to achieve, is it simply finding a job, is it finding new clients for a business. Whatever it is, have goals in mind.

The importance of networking for women leaders has both positive and negative connotations (Bartz & Lambert, 2014). On one hand, I noted that senior women

leaders are busy at work and at home and don't want to take more time away from their families or personal interests and as a result, networking gets put on the back burner. Yet, on the other hand, by not networking women are missing out on opportunities. Participant 6 was quite vocal on women and their networks:

Build your network, so what I coach people to do is build your LinkedIn profile. Build your LinkedIn profile and go and find everyone you know. Men will do that, they'll find someone they played rugby with in the fourth form or the head boy of their grammar school and they'll link with them and you can be damn sure that that person's somewhere successful now and they'll go and have a beer with them, men are brilliant at networking, and they get business from it. Whereas women, network with your forever best friends that you went to coffee group with and you had your life's biggest traumas, it's hopeless.

Self-belief was among the main challenges many of the women had to negotiate, as mentioned above, in relation to authenticity and finding an individual voice and leadership style. The timing of opportunities was described by Participant 1 who stated "Sometimes the timing might not fit quite right but if you push yourself you can usually do it. And if you don't take those opportunities you often don't get them again for some time." Participant 5 puts it bluntly: "People are so time poor around opportunities, they go wow how am I going to fit all that in with all this." Believing in yourself and being brave around taking opportunities was the main advice given. I have personally taken on the advice of Participant 2, who states: "I have always had the attitude of if an opportunity does present itself I always consider it even though it might sound crazy."

Diminishing Obstacles

One of the most significant findings of this study, which confounded my expectations, was the limited number (if any for some) of obstacles women encountered on the journey up their leadership ladder. This is not at all what I expected; nor did it feature strongly in the literature (Sandberg, 2013). I thought all of the women I interviewed would have inevitably had to break through the glass ceiling at least once in their leadership journeys. Participant 1 explains there was no glass ceiling “I can honestly say I didn’t find many obstacles. Obstacles when you’re in leadership and you’re in other environments in that leadership role often are from people who don’t understand as much as the fact that it’s a woman.”

The results showed that there was no evidence of a glass ceiling for any of the participants, whether they worked for a profit or not-for-profit organisation. There has been much research concerning the obstacles women face when climbing the corporate leadership ladder, with evidence suggesting that they typically confront a ‘glass ceiling’ (Tavakolian, 1993; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Baxter & Wright, 2000; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Therefore, the results of my research both surprised and encouraged me as they showed that women can reach the top of the leadership ladder, and encounter no ‘glass ceiling.’ I believe this is because all of the participants were at some point sponsored in their careers. It is important to note that I did not have a specific question on glass ceilings *per se*, but rather a question on whether there were any obstacles the participant had encountered. This question was phrased specifically to allow a wide range of discussion around different obstacles, including the ‘glass ceiling’. Although there was no evidence of a ‘glass ceiling’ in the results of this research, it was not easy for these women to get into senior leadership positions.

When I think of leadership I see it as typically a male domain, perhaps because the majority of my bosses have been male. The traditional paradigm of leadership being male was similarly noted by several of the participants; however, they provided good examples of how women can succeed in male-dominated industries. It was interesting, however, that even in female-dominated industries it was no easier for the participants to move up the leadership ladder. This was typically due to men still occupying in the top leadership positions. Williams (1992) showed that men (particularly in female-dominated professions) were more likely to be conveyed into management positions. Participant 8 adds to this notion by stating that in her experience: “The main obstacle is still the perception that leadership is male, a leader is a man.” For example, Participant 8 explains how being a woman can be a disadvantage at times:

In terms of say the board picking the next CEO it’s a huge disadvantage to be a female, the bar is much higher. And when you get to be a CEO of a public company the investors give you a much harder time. They’re a lot less forgiving, there’s much higher penalties for women if they are perceived to have not done the right thing etc. So there are times I think it’s a huge disadvantage but that’s not an omnipresent reality every day.

Some of the participants told stories of their own experiences with gender discrimination in senior leadership and/or board positions. This often came in the form of comments from male colleagues questioning their ability, making inappropriate comments or requests, or most commonly, questioning their capability to have a career and family. Another participant who is the CEO of a large not-for-profit organisation tells a personal story of gender discrimination in

the workplace: she explains “I’ve been asked to bring a plate to someone’s meeting even though I’m attending as the CEO and I’ve turned up thinking this is odd, and then I was the only person asked to bring a plate because I was the woman.”

Not all of the women interviewed experienced gender discrimination, so it may not be widespread and/or may be more a question of perception, since Participant 7 openly states that “I can honestly say that I have never experienced any pushback in terms of gender.”

Building a strong reputation for delivery was a way the participants negated gender discrimination and the glass ceiling. The participants agreed that the best way to diminish obstacles is to work hard, be the best person for the job, regardless of gender, and to build a reputation as being able to deliver results on-time and within budget. Participant 4 explains “In terms of obstacles, I got to a point where I was recognised for being very good at what I did in my career, and therefore people would come to me and ask me to do things based on my experience and my reputation. Therefore it didn’t matter whether I was man or a woman.” The clear takeaway for me (and hopefully others alike) is that women have to focus on developing and demonstrating excellence in their field of work. Participant 7 gives the advice of “You can actually do things, and have faith in your own ability. But I guess, and it’s not a negative but you might perceive it to be, don’t expect any special treatment just because you are a woman. You make the choices that you want to make and then you deliver against those choices.”

One particular comment from a participant has stuck with me; she said that as an entrepreneur “there are more career paths now I think in general, and also for

women than there ever used to be.” Five out of the eleven participants left major corporations in order to start their own businesses to further their careers. According to Rosener (1995) the act of leaving large corporations and moving to "smaller, more hospitable organization[s]" is a common response among professional women experiencing workplace discrimination (p. 113, as cited in Davies-Netzley, 1998). Upon reflection, perhaps starting a business allows women to move into leadership in their own way, allowing more flexibility around work/life balance.

What I have learned from these women’s experiences is that even though the leadership model has been traditionally seen as male (O’Leary, 1974), women can, and do, achieve senior leadership positions. All the participants acknowledged that external barriers can make it more difficult to reach the top, but these women demonstrated that it is by no means impossible to achieve.

Work/Life Balance

Work/Life balance was the major issue for all these women leaders. In fact it was probably the biggest obstacle many of them had to negotiate, whether they had children or not. Research on women in leadership has work-life balance as a major topic and features strongly in the leadership literature (Jones et al., 2006; Kanwar, Singh & Kodwani, 2009; Slaughter, 2012; Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012; Wallace, 2014). Before this research I had always thought women could have it all, but after listening to the journeys of these women my expectations have changed significantly. What was of personal interest to me was the many differing opinions around work and a woman’s choice about children, childcare and careers. These are decisions that I am grappling with personally at the moment and

I was eager to gain advice and perhaps some clarity in my own mind from women who had already “been there, done that.”

One area all participants agreed on was the need for good support systems. Support was seen as essential in order to cope with the demands of their high positional leadership roles (Schwartz, 1989; Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012). For the majority of participants, immediate and extended family members helped with household duties and responsibilities to enable the women to fulfil their leadership responsibilities. All of the participants who had children explained the need for supportive husbands or partners and how important these men were, particularly in terms of childcare. In a recent survey of American couples, the majority of men and women endorsed the egalitarian notion that mothers and fathers should equally share the responsibility of everyday childcare (Parker & Wang, 2013). An example of this in action was explained by Participant 9:

This is our first baby, and I have a husband, so my husband is at home full time looking after her. I think this whole question of work-life balance, well if you’ve got a husband at home full-time looking after your children that makes an enormous difference to the question. I’m not sitting here worrying about my children; I know they’re in the best possible hands.

The choice of having a family or not was a thought-provoking area of discussion especially in light of my own circumstances. All the participants acknowledged that spending time with partners, family and friends was important but was often a challenge to manage. Participant 4 described the challenges she faces with her husband: “Last week for example, I was out at work events every single night.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. By the time it got to Saturday my husband was really grumpy.” In order to mend things, this participant arranged for her and her husband to go to the rugby on Saturday night to spend some time together. However it turned into work; “I had to go to the rugby to negotiate this deal with somebody who couldn’t meet any other time.” Needless to say, her husband was not happy. The results of these discussions have made me think about my relationships and my (university) work, and where my priorities lie.

Three of the eleven women chose not to have children in order to focus on their careers. This correlates with global figures on women in leadership. A McKinsey and Company (2007) survey of middle and senior managers around the world showed that 54% of women managers were childless compared to 29% of men. An Australian report on Women in Management found that female leaders feared the stigma associated with motherhood as this may suggest a lesser commitment to workplace demands (Piterman, 2008). The idea of having to choose between having a successful career or raising children was an issue described by several participants. Participant 2 honestly described her views saying:

I think for me too, my husband and I don’t have children. I want to say this in the right way but I think I haven’t had that holding me back. I think as a woman you take that break to have children, and even if you just take a real quick break and go right back to work you’re putting a priority on your family.

Participant 8 chose not to have children, but her advice sums up the main questions women (including myself) need to ask themselves before having children:

A key issue is; do you have a satisfactory support structure, whether it's parents to look after the kids or a supportive partner, or just close friends who live near you? It's what sort of domestic support network you've got around you is really important.

The majority of women interviewed (73%) did choose to have children and explained that with children there are many more challenges to balancing work and family life. For instance, married mothers now devote even more time to primary child care per week than they did in earlier generations (12.9 hours in 2000 compared to 10.6 hours in 1965), despite the fact that fathers, too, put in a lot more hours than they used to (6.5 hours versus 2.6 hours). Pressures for intensive parenting and the increasing demands of most high-level careers have left women with very little time for any other "life" activities (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The results of the present study revealed that childcare was one of the biggest issues for the participants. Participant 10 explains "I've only got one child and we've always had nannies. So while my husband was working we've had live-in nannies for a long, long time." However, not all the women were fans of children being put in childcare. Participant 3 explained her view:

The other day we talked about the fact that babies are in childcare for 11 hours a day, what in the hell kind of society do we think we're creating? Women think if they go out of the system to look after a baby for two years or something that they can't get back. That's not true, it all depends on you, and how driven you are and what you want.

Technology has enabled all of the women to work and be contacted anytime, anywhere, which has had both positive and negative consequences for their work/life balance. Deciding when, where, and how to be accessible at work is an ongoing challenge, particularly for executives with families (Wallace, 2014). Technology gives women more choices and allows an easier integration of work and family life. The participant's responses were similar to those obtained in research by Currie and Eveline (2011) who discuss how mobile technologies facilitate choice and flexibility, yet they also blur the boundaries of work and family time. I strongly agreed with Participant 7 comment: "I think in today's world nobody has a work/life balance because people are constantly checking phones and checking any sort of mobile app to see what's going on." Participant 10 explains "I'm not a workaholic, but I'll do stuff on the weekends. To be fair, we're always on because the technology's always on so yes, I will answer emails at 10.30 at night and do that sort of stuff but I don't feel bound to the desk." I found this particularly challenging because it was hard to determine if it is possible to completely switch off in today's digital world, and what does that mean for young people like me? We may not be "bound to our desks" as participant 10 explains, but will we be just as bound to our phones.

The attitudes the women had towards work varied between the participants. Participant 7 explains "You actually get yourself working to that rhythm that suits you, and probably in today's world what is one of the more important descriptions that I've heard recently is work is what you do, not where you go." This comment confirmed my previous concerns about being bound to technology. On the other hand, Participant 6 explained to me that as individuals we need to decide that work is not everything in life, "For me, work is part of life; it's not all of life. And I think

a lot of people; well work's become a religion to some people. To me it's not. I don't live to work, I work to live." The key learning for me personally was to decide on my priorities, which include decisions on when and what work to do (outside of work hours).

Many of the women have learned to balance their work and life better as a result of various personal experiences. Participant 4 explains "My work/life balance now is much better than it's ever been at any time in my life." Participant 6 recounts the story of how having breast cancer has forced her to refocus her life:

I'm a survivor. I had breast cancer six years ago. But it's not that. That was part of the journey; it's the fact that life is not all about work. For me, work has its place and I've learnt that the hard way over the years and now I think I've got it in the right spot.

Some of the women still struggle with work-life balance, which was encouraging to me as it demonstrated the human element of these successful women. Participant 7 said: "Look, I'm hopeless at work/life balance okay." Similarly, Participant 11 explains: "I find it very difficult to manage [my work/life balance]. I get told off by my daughters all the time about my priorities, plus not seeing enough of me. That saddens me, and that's quite hard." One of the pieces of advice I found personally useful was from Participant 9 who explained that she has learnt to put boundaries in place in order to have more of a work/life balance: "I think you have to. Otherwise if you don't put boundaries around work then it will continue to take over your life."

Regret and guilt were two things I had never thought about when it came to deciding whether or not to have children. Two of the women verbally regretted not having more children. Participant 3 got particularly emotional when explaining her regret:

It is actually my greatest regret. I go and talk to all kinds of groups of people, and inevitably they ask you your greatest regret and it's not having a lot more children because at the end of the day, no matter what your career is and how successful you are, what is really precious is your children. And the love and the relationship you have with them, nothing, no success, ever beats that. I missed a lot of things, and I wish I had done it differently.

Similarly, Participant 6 expressed her feelings saying "I feel like I missed out on a lot of growing up time, I went to everything but I wasn't there like my husband was. And that's really important to me." Now in their 60's, three of the participants are making up for time lost with their own children by spending lots of time with their grandchildren. One participant boldly states "I missed a lot of things, and I wish I had of done it differently, now I have grandchildren who are the utter joy of my life." I personally like the recommendation given by Slaughter (2012), whose opinions were echoed by Participant 9 who believes that seeking out a more balanced life isn't just a women's issue, it's a human issue, that men have to face too, and we'd all – men and women – be a lot better off if we addressed the issue that way.

Being a young woman myself and faced with the choice of whether or not to have children, my discussions with participant 3 had a personal impact on me. Her advice was poignant:

Our young women are driven to have a career, to put off having babies, to minimize the amount of time they spend with them. To me that's an utter disaster, and I would say to any young woman don't do it, think really, really carefully about how important this is to you.

These successful women I have interviewed have all made huge personal sacrifices to be in their top leadership positions, from having their children in childcare from 6 weeks old or with a nanny, to marrying and divorcing several times, to choosing not to have children at all to avoid the interruption to their career. I am left wondering if this is the price that we have to pay for success. Rhode (2003) poses a similar question "Given the vast array of new options for women's lives for the 21st century, what will women chose? Will large numbers of women want to track to the top of the leadership ladder, or will it be flexi-time, telecommuting or small business ownership?" (p. 71). Rhode (2003) concludes that different women want different things, and, in addition to that, women require different things at different stages in their lives. My expectations have changed and now I believe work/life balance is not as simple as I had once believed. I have learnt that it is all about choice, priorities and what suits the individual. Overall, what I found personally refreshing is there was no judgement around whether women had children or not, but what was apparent was how everyone agreed it was down to each individual's personal choice. As Participant 7 explains:

It comes down to choice and you choose what you want to do in life. You then can't say oh well if I'd only known X, Y or Z, I wouldn't have made those choices. Now you don't necessarily have it all but there are ways in which you can actually manage the bits you really want.

Summary

The thematic analysis identified four key themes; personal attributes, values and drivers; mentors and sponsors; opportunities and obstacles.

There were many common personal characteristics among these successful women leaders, including self-confidence, ambition, a positive can-do attitude and the drive to create opportunities and take opportunities when they are presented. This is consistent with the leadership literature (Hambrick, 1988; Lichtenstein, 2005). The interviewees all stated that their leadership style was underpinned with strong principles and values, such as caring about others and wanting to make a difference. Additionally, one trait that was consistent among the participants was an enthusiasm for continual learning. Many of the participants grew up in supportive families who encouraged their aspirations to leadership and a formal education as a basis for a future career.

The predominant leadership style among the participants was akin to servant leadership, with a focus on the best outcomes for their staff and organisations, not their personal gain. This echoes recent leadership literature on servant leadership, where Winston and Fields (2015) explain “leaders exercising servant leadership act in the best interests of followers, and do not engage in manipulative, self-interested actions” (p. 414).

A surprising result of this research was that men were women’s biggest sponsors, and for women wanting to advance their careers, sponsorship is the key. The importance of women getting themselves a good sponsor was a recurring theme in the women’s responses, as well as the more recent leadership literature (Hewlett,

2013). Many participants described a clear link between successful networking and finding an effective sponsor who creates the networks and the opportunities for women to advance into.

Despite the large body of literature on the obstacles women face when trying to climb the leadership ladder (Tavakolian, 1993; Davies-Netzley, 1998; Baxter & Wright, 2000; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kellerman & Rhode 2007; McDonagh & Paris, 2012; DeFrank-Cole et al., 2014), very few of these women encountered a glass ceiling and/or experienced gender discrimination. The consensus was that the best way to diminish obstacles was to work hard, be the best person for the job regardless of gender, and to build a reputation for delivery.

Work/life balance still remains the biggest obstacle for many of these women. This was not surprising as much of the literature on the challenges women leaders face is centred on work-life balance (Jones et al., 2006; Kanwar et al., 2009; Slaughter, 2012; Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012; Wallace, 2014). Support from immediate and extended family members was shown to be essential in allowing these women to successfully fulfil their leadership responsibilities.

Upon reflection, women seem to have more options now and more women are taking control of their careers, for example, through entrepreneurship. This has allowed women to move into leadership on their own terms, with increased flexibility around work/life balance. The main message for me is that it's all about making your own decisions and finding what is right for you. As one participant pointed out "you've actually got to find and do what works for you."

Chapter 6: Conclusions

The central research question in this study was “How do women move into senior leadership roles in New Zealand organisations?” What has become clear is that as a first priority, women need ambition as an intrinsic motivation towards leadership positions. Secondly, sponsorship is the key to obtaining senior leadership positions, and thirdly, strong support structures are needed to enable women to reach and maintain leadership positions. Finally, strong personal values are vital to success in leadership.

This research showed that ambition was the key intrinsic motivator for women who aspire to senior leadership positions. The ability to work hard and focus on goals and outcomes is also important; the participants all commented that it takes a lot of hard work to get to the top. The interviewees all stated their leaderships were underpinned by strong principles and values, which links well with the leadership literature (Hambrick, 1988; Lichtenstein, 2005). Kouzes and Posner (1997) explain “to lead others requires passionate commitment to a set of fundamental beliefs and principles, visions and dreams” (p. 9). There was a consensus that self-confidence, a positive can-do attitude and readiness to take opportunities are all necessary (but only part of the equation) to gain a senior leadership position.

From my personal perspective, the most exciting learning was the critical role of sponsorship in providing opportunities to move up. These successful women also stated strongly and frequently that sponsorship is a key enabler for women to gain senior leadership positions. Interestingly, most of the women had been sponsored by men, and saw sponsorship as accelerating their leadership careers. Such

acceleration ranged from getting noticed by senior-level executives to being considered for a top job in an organisation. The participants agreed that seeking sponsorship is one of the most vital strategies for women wanting to advance their leadership careers, which was probably one of the most significant findings in this research.

Another important finding concerned the importance of support. Many of the participants described the personal cost of holding senior leadership roles and commented that strong family support was vital to allowing them to manage their work/life balance. The evidence from the interviews brought to life more than any of the literature, how, with good support systems such as supportive husbands, parents and extended family to help with domestic duties and childcare, these women were able to have a successful leadership career. The interviewees were sympathetic to those not in such fortunate positions. Without that network, women who plan a family are at a disadvantage. Here again the interviewees really brought this home to me in a way that I think is relevant for all younger women setting out to obtain a top leadership role. Without good support structures it is very difficult; as Participant 4 explains “For women who don’t have a supportive partner or family, something’s going to give and it will either be the relationship or the job.”

From this research two main points stood out to me. The first was the confirmation, in terms of what they had done as well as what they had said, that women can achieve anything. The second was the realization that women cannot “have it all” without some sacrifices; this was a real personal learning for me. Their words and actions also pushed me to dig more deeply into the importance of values. It ultimately boils down to what you value most: family, job or lifestyle.

Participant 6's advice still resonates with me "Well it all depends what you value Olivia." Participant 9 explained it differently: "It's a choice, I think that has to be a very personal choice, whether you're a woman or a man, it's about the priorities in your life."

I believe this research provides encouragement to women as it shows they can reach senior leadership roles. I feel incredibly privileged to have been able to interview many of New Zealand's top women leaders, and their stories have been truly inspiring. The knowledge I have gained from this journey will be invaluable for my future and for the future of other women.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of the research was methodological. The study only researched those women who were contacted and chosen through a snowball sampling method so there was no attempt at representational selection other than being top women leaders. That said, given the relatively small number interviewed, the research did manage to cross a number of key sectors, and the women themselves often had varied backgrounds that enabled them to speak on conditions outside their current workplaces. I have no doubt that, with the opportunity, time and resources to interview more women leaders, this line of research would have provided additional dimensions and contributed other insights. Nevertheless, it was a pioneering study, despite being far short of the saturation required for full-scale grounded theory research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2005; Charmaz, 2006).

Another limitation of this study was size, in that it consisted of eleven participants. Accordingly, it was not possible to make generalizable conclusions that relate to all women leaders within New Zealand, let alone internationally. However, the findings tended to agree with the existing literature that indicates gaining senior leadership positions is not easy for women (Piterman, 2008; Ministry of Women Affairs, 2013). What this study's findings have highlighted is that such positions can be achieved. The participants and the leadership literature focus strongly on the role sponsorship plays in advancing more women into senior leadership positions (Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett, 2013). I believe this knowledge will help younger women like myself, reach positions of leadership.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

Recommendations for Women Aspiring To Leadership

This research had two purposes: firstly, to discover a pathway for leadership for myself in particular – but also for other young women considering leadership roles – by gaining a better understanding of how women move into leadership roles; and secondly, to provide guidance and encouragement to future generations of women of all ages who aspire to leadership.

The first recommendation I would give any women thinking of getting into leadership is to ask yourselves the following questions: 1) Are you truly ambitious to be a leader? 2) Is obtaining leadership a strong priority; how badly do you want it and what would you sacrifice to obtain your goals? These questions arose through the interviews and also resonated with my own journey. From the literature I found that ambition and determination were key prerequisites for women entering into leadership positions (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). However, as participant after participant stressed, just having ambition alone is not enough. Participant 1 gave some honest advice

You can be ambitious, and that's really good. We should be ambitious to achieve the best we can, but what's driving that ambition? Is the driver to get the best outcomes for something that you're working for, or is it just to get the position, to get the recognition and power? So I dare say it's the difference, whether it's values driving you or some other extrinsic factor that's driving you into leadership.

This quote rang true with many of the other participants' stories and it was evident that it was their own intrinsic motivators and priorities that led these women to success. I was fascinated by this result and even though the participants were from varied disciplines, the source of their motivation to succeed was predominately internal. I could see some of the same motivators in myself, but it also made me question my own motivation for wanting to be successful; is it purely internal or do some external motivators like money and position play a part? It was interesting to observe that Participant 1 had talked to two young women who had come into the organisation and were aiming to advance. One woman sees herself as the next chief executive and her motivation seems to be title and power. In contrast, for the second woman, while she is very assertive and strong, it's about the organisation and what she can do to make things as good as possible for the whole group. Participant 1 stressed that the second woman had internal drivers that lead not only to personal success, but also to organisational success. The important recommendation is to have your personal values aligned (intrinsic motivation) with your work, because then you'll actually want to work hard and will believe in what you're doing.

In addition, all the women interviewed explained the importance of recognising your talents early and being very clear and deliberate about your career path and the choices you make. At the same time, there was a consensus among the participants that women should not have expectations of entitlement (Hewlett, 2002; Rhode, 2003). One participant was very clear about this saying "don't expect any special treatment because you are a woman." Instead, success will come from hard work and a series of other factors built on top of that, including personal motivations.

Very simply, the next recommendation is to recognise and evaluate your priorities in life. Rhode (2003) and many others found that many top leadership roles have demanding work schedules, unpredictable workloads and in some cases frequent travel. The women interviewed have all, at times, put their work priorities above their relationship and family commitments. The cost of climbing the leadership ladder can be high. This does not mean that in choosing to go for senior leadership positions, women cannot have partners and children. All of the women I interviewed did get married (some several times) and some chose to have children while others did not. What emerged as a key issue for each of them when deciding on moving up the leadership ladder was whether or not they had a satisfactory support structure. Such structures might be parents to look after the children, a supportive partner, or just close friends who live nearby. The clear conclusion was that without a strong support system many of these highly successful women may not have been able to hold the leadership positions they have today.

In my opinion, the most vital recommendation for aspiring women leaders is to take the initiative and seek out a good sponsor. This is more than a mentor; it is someone who will sponsor your career, not just your skill set and education. I was surprised that, based on the results of this research, men were these women's biggest sponsors, getting them positions as well as mentoring them through their careers. There was very general agreement that if you're a woman who's looking for advancement (e.g., getting on to boards; landing a senior executive role), a man is going to be a much more effective champion for you than a woman. That is because men can say things and do things with other men and peers that a woman cannot usually, at present, do. Therefore, the findings suggest that getting a man in power to sponsor you would be a very good way to start climbing the leadership ladder.

Accordingly, as a young woman, I strongly emphasise the value of asking for strategic assistance from those in power both within the organisation and beyond it.

The final recommendation lies in our own hands, and that is to take every opportunity. As well as taking any available opportunities to advance, be deliberate and strategic in seeking both the opportunities and the people who can assist in opening them up. For, many, including myself, this does not come easily and it involves taking risks. One participant gave some incredibly poignant advice

So many women are nervous about the risk, nervous about what they see as risk so therefore they tend to live in what I call this grey circle. When I look at that circle I see a lot of fear, a lot of doubt, a lot of I can't do this. All you've got to do to step out into the rainbow - You just need to believe, you need to take those risks, you need to look at those opportunities and take them.

Recommendations for Future Research

One area of particular interest that emerged from the results was ambition being the biggest motivator of women who rise to top management and leadership positions. A review of the leadership literature shows that there are few studies (see Ryan & Deci, 2000; Kalkowski & Fritz, 2004) focused on how ambition affects motivation (particularly intrinsic motivation) in women leaders. Future research could look at how ambition influences the types of motivation across the various stages of a women's career, with the hope of establishing relationships between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators throughout their leadership journeys.

The current literature and the experiences of the women in this study showed that a strong sponsorship programme and an ongoing focus on effective networking are necessary for women in leadership. Much of the published literature has been written from a critical perspective, and very little has focused on a positive and encouraging approach to help women move into leadership positions. In future, a focus on Appreciative Inquiry and more strengths-based research could look at how successful women network and find sponsors, with a focus on examining the factors and training that differentiate effective leaders from those that are less successful.

This research showed that high positional leadership comes at a high personal cost. However, with the rise of technology many women are starting their own companies to combat this cost and gain a better work/life balance. Future research could look into whether women entrepreneurs have a better work/life balance compared to women in traditional corporate leadership roles in similar-sized organisations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Participants Information Disclosure Sheet

Waikato Management School

Te Raupapa



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Overview

My name is Olivia Loeffen. As part of my Master of Management studies for the University of Waikato, I am conducting and reporting on a research project. This "Report of an Investigation" forms an important part of my Master degree. For my project I wish to research: Exploring Women's Leadership Journeys.

What will you have to do and how long will it take?

I would like you to participate in a one to one interview to gather information about your experiences of being in a leadership role. The interview will be a semi-structured interview, consisting of open questions and discussion time. I expect it will take 60 minutes of your time. If you agree, the interview will be recorded and subsequently transcribed. I also intend to take notes during the interview.

What will happen to the information collected?

Your responses will be used to write a 'Report of an Investigation'. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the information you provide me in the interview notes, recordings and the paper written. After no less than three months from the completion of the project, all notes and recordings will be destroyed. I will keep a copy of the paper on file but will treat it with the strictest confidentiality.

All identifying information contained in interview information will be removed when that information is included in my Report. This ensures the privacy of participants.

Declaration to participants

If you take part in the study, you have the right to:

- Refuse to answer any particular question.
- Withdraw from the study at any time.
- Ask any further questions about the study that occurs to you during your participation.
- Be given access to a summary of the findings from the study when it is concluded.

If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact me:-

Olivia Loeffen, University of Waikato Masters Research Student

My project is being supervised by Professor David McKie. His contact details are:-

Address: Waikato Management School, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

Consent Form for Participants

Waikato Management School

Te Raupapa



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Exploring Women's Leadership Journeys Consent Form for Participants

I have read the **Information Sheet for Participants** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out on the **Information Sheet**.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the **Information Sheet** form.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's name and contact information:

Olivia Loeffen

University of Waikato Masters Research Student

Supervisor's name and contact information:

Professor David McKie

Waikato Management School

Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240

Appendix 3: Participant Interview Questions

Thesis Interview Questions for Women Leaders

Introduction

- Explain the purpose of my research
- Ensure participant is aware of their right to choose not to answer and reinforce confidentiality
- Gain written consent prior to the interview commencing and confirm at the end of the interview to use the information obtained.
- Advise that the interview may take up to one hour, and check for questions.
- Gain agreement to commence.
- Proceed with questions.

Questions

1. Tell me what were some of the best things about your personal leadership journey?
(Some things that could be talked about include: where did you grow up? What type of family environment did you have growing up? School/University achievements?)
2. When and how did you first move into a leadership role?
3. How did you move into your current leadership role?
4. What three things did you do well to help you move into previous and/or current leadership roles?
5. What three things do you think you might have done better to move into previous and/or current leadership roles?
6. What external factors helped you transition into a leadership role or roles?
7. What external factors might have helped you better transition into a leadership role or roles?
8. Did anyone help you move into leadership? If yes, how did they help?
9. Do you think anyone might have helped you more? If yes, who and what would that help have involved?

10. What 3 things do you do well now that prepare you for further leadership opportunities?
11. What 3 things could you do better now to prepare you, or other women, for further leadership opportunities?
12. Do you see any obstacles to you advancing further? If yes, what are they?
13. Did the organizational culture of your workplace influence your leadership journey in a positive or negative way?
 - a. Did you ever have to leave an organization in order to advance your career?
14. Is there anything else or advice you'd like to share about women and leadership?

Additional questions will be asked based on the data gathered during the interview and any probing questions based on the participants' responses

Concluding the Interview

- Clarify any interviewer questions
- Thank the participant
- Clarify consent to follow-up with any additional questions once the interview has been transcribed.