

Female leadership: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Several studies have shown that women have the same levels and sometimes higher levels of training than men and account for about 50% of the workforce. Yet women are underrepresented in higher hierarchical positions. The number of women in positions of high power and authority has increased, although there are obstacles to female advancement to the highest levels of the organizational hierarchy (Catalyst, 2017a; Catalyst, 2017b; Eurostat 2016; Grant Thornton, 2016).

Factors, such as cultural and social norms, as well as women's roles and responsibilities, may result in biased perceptions of women and their ability to lead (Haile, Emmanuel & Dzathor, 2016) appearing as some of the barriers that justify the lesser female presence in top positions. The barriers identified by Diehl and Dzubinski (2016), operate on several levels. Difficulties are identified at the level of society in general, at the organizational level and finally at the individual level. Some metaphors are used to illustrate the difficulties faced by women in the context of work, namely the labyrinth, which symbolizes the difficulties women face throughout their career; the sticky floor, that represents the challenges women face at an early phase of their career; or the glass ceiling, representing the fact that women are unable to advance to the highest levels of leadership and are retained at the last level. Women can only advance to the highest level of leadership by breaking this invisible "ceiling" (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to characterize female leadership, more specifically to explore the obstacles and opportunities. In this qualitative study, we used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The participants were ten women in leadership positions, with an average age of 40 years old and they were in leadership positions for nine years on average. Data was analyzed according to thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The results of this study suggest that female leadership is characterized by some challenges, mainly gender bias and difficulties at personal, family and professional level, but it is mainly characterized by opportunities.

Gender bias represents a challenge that operates at the social and organizational level, on the one hand, women are given family responsibilities that originates higher

workload (Haile et al., 2016), on the other hand, some of the stereotypes and prejudices existing outside the organizations are later transported to the organizational environment, which results in a devaluation and limitation of female leadership (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). Stress (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999) the high workload with family and home (Torres et al., 2018) and the difficulty in finding role models and women's mentors also represent some of the challenges found (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

Opportunities arise through the support that the leaders receive (Cheung & Halpern, 2010), through the combination of some personal characteristics and also through the use of strategies that allow reconciliation of personal and professional life (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz & Shockley, 2013). Developmental practices, such as mentoring (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz & Lima, 2004) and coaching (Day, 2000), are also conducive to female leadership. Finally, some opportunities were identified in the context of personal, family and professional life, such as the importance of moments to rest and self-care (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999), time with family (Kossek, 2016) and also the importance of making a strategic career management and decision making (Kossek, Roberts, Fisher & DeMarr, 1998; Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli & Bilimoria, 2008).

It is possible to conclude that, although the executive world is still very masculine, the presence of women in top leadership positions is increasing. Even though this process is slow and gradual, women are positioning themselves to achieve even greater success in the future.

Key words: Leadership development; gender stereotype; feminine leadership; work-life conflict.

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